



The Specter of Hypocrisy

Testing the Limits of Moral Discourse

Raphael Sassower

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“When Mark Twain proposed that ‘[a] lie can travel half-way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes,’ he could never have contemplated the internet age that has rendered discourse unmediated and unrestricted by the boundaries of space and time. Raphael Sassower’s timely reflection on the manifold complexity of hypocrisy could not be more necessary. This carefully constructed argument’s consideration of the implication of falsehoods across multiple registers of life is required reading.”

—Michael E. Sawyer, *Colorado College, USA, and author of Black Minded: The Political Philosophy of Malcolm X* (2020)

“In our age of ‘phony news’ and of the ‘post-factual’, Raphael Sassower’s new intervention is timely. In this book, he takes on the notion of hypocrisy as a way not only to challenge the current political scene, but more importantly and with more long-lasting reverberations, he challenges the borders of moral philosophy themselves. The relationship between the moral and the hypocritical are here explored, most interestingly between the Greek actor and the Hebrew chameleon.”

—Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *Director of the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women and Professor of Italian Studies and Comparative Literature, Brown University, USA*

“Professor Sassower’s *The Specter of Hypocrisy* invites the reader to an intellectual celebration. It presents the triumph of humane reasoning over its cynic pretender. It is the most incisive study of one of the most disturbing psychosocial phenomena of our post-truth Trumpian times. Sassower portrays the sad picture of our current human condition as it appears on a global canvas writ large by the American colossal failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A wake up call it should be, Sassower says, or else. A society that has lost its compass, one that mixes truth and fallacy, hypocrisy and integrity, irrevocably loses touch with reality and destroys its own social matrix. The remedy he offers is a strong and hard one to swallow. It cuts through all intellectual polarities serving the cultural myths that populate our social, psychological, religious and political theories and practices. Sassower’s analysis of the problem situation is a *tour de force*. His mastery and depth of research into psychological, psychoanalytic, social, moral, philosophical, and religious theories that pertain to his subject matter is breathtaking. Sassower’s style verges, at times, on the poetic and exceptionally transpires both humane compassion and philosophical modesty. To mend our world, he says,

it is all about truth and truth telling—of friends to one another out of caring about integrity and social bonds. No more posturing as friends, but owning up to one's friendship. Sassower offers us a new intellectual framework allowing degrees of hypocrisy and their empathic truthful discussion. This way we may go on searching for socially astute manipulative self-presentations without giving up on our commitment to the honest quest for ever-improving levels of personal and social integrity. The book is a must-read."

—Nathaniel Laor, *Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Philosophy, Tel Aviv University, and Clinical Professor, Child Study Center, Yale University, USA*

"If hypocrisy is the horse that has bolted from the barn in our post-truth condition, Raphael Sassower is the 'horse whisperer', trying to coax the creature back to its paddock. While Trump has clearly galvanized Sassower into action, his approach to hypocrisy is characteristically very wide-ranging and nuanced—and not entirely unsympathetic. Regardless of what one ultimately makes of the pervasiveness of hypocrisy in today's society, this is the one book that takes it with the seriousness it deserves."

—Steve Fuller, *University of Warwick, author of Post Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (2018)

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INTRODUCTION

A specter is haunting America, the specter of hypocrisy. This is not a pious lamentation over the loss of civil decorum associated with conduct that fails to meet moral standards or a blithe avowal of the inevitability of messy human interactions. Instead, the specter of hypocrisy haunts in the form of the *charge of hypocrisy* in the social and political domains. Calling someone a hypocrite is at once a charge and a judgment with presumptions about the criteria that inform this charge. The person who makes the charge appeals to moral values and virtues even when the contexts are social and political. Of course, the charging person can be charged in turn for their hypocrisy in an infinite regress. Being charged, a person is expected to reflect on values and virtues undergirding the community to which they belong, admitting failure if that is the case and a promise of correction. The charge of hypocrisy, when it is answered, can only be answered in a moral register, bringing to light and perhaps demanding a response even from the likes of President Trump, who may shrug with indifference, a register that appeals to moral norms rather than to social or political expediency. This appeal transcends contractual relationships, the rules of the legal system, or good manners and civility. As much as we distinguish between the spirit and the letter of the law, so must we distinguish between the social contract writ large and the moral commitments that underlie it and without which such a contract remains procedural and instrumental. Neither social relations nor political systems and institutions can refrain from acknowledging their reliance on moral principles.

The charge of hypocrisy directs attention to these principles without ceding the social or political stage to religious zealots or moralizing fundamentalists.

The conversations about the charge hypocrisy examined here recall Nietzsche's genealogy of morals that considers moral conventions and norms in terms of their historical power relations rather than in terms of transcendental appeals to absolutes. As an interrogation of the moral dimension of the social and political, the charge of hypocrisy reframes established canons of adjudication, such as prudence, efficacy, efficiency, and timeliness in moral terms. This charge toggles between an appeal to transcendent moral principles, such as fairness and honesty, and a recognition of the specific social and political contexts within which they appear. As problematic as an appeal to transcendent principles may be, it is inevitable, perhaps necessary under certain conditions. Without it, the danger of cynical relativism and outright nihilism looms large. Focusing on the discursive power of the charge of hypocrisy might separate the moralizing tendencies that so often accompany this charge and deeper moral layers that deserve close study. Here, too, there is a difference between using morality for political purposes, to dismiss rival positions or mock reasonable disagreements, and insisting that political choices are inescapably moral as well: do they stand the test of fairness and justice? The charge of hypocrisy encourages critical self-reflection of both the charging party and those being charged, thereby avoiding the risk of nihilism or cynicism, the Trumpian dismissal of any appeal to ethics and virtues, or the belief that such an appeal is inherently in bad faith.

Hypocrisy is fascinating partially because it is seen by some to mean lying, by others to exemplify bad faith, and still by others as the disconnection between professed ideals and actual conduct. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that hypocrisy is the "practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform; pretense." And a hypocrite is someone who is "assuming of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character or inclinations, especially in respect of religious life or beliefs; hence in a general sense, dissimulation, pretence, sham." To speak about hypocrisy in moral terms, as most critics and commentators do, is to test not only the usefulness of the term but also the limits of moral discourse insofar as it cannot account for the different contexts within which the term is applied. If moral philosophy offers a set of transcendental principles and theories according to which virtue and vice are codified

and a set of criteria with which to judge human conduct, then it seems that only some kinds of hypocrisy would fit into this discourse. This book explores which kinds of hypocrisy or what degrees of hypocrisy do not fit neatly into the analytic moral discourse. These would not be the more obvious ones treated by moral discourse that analyzes outright lying, deception and self-deception, acting in bad faith, and pretending to be “better” in some sense than one truly is. The present focus is on the Greek etymology of stage actors masking and unmasking themselves *and* the modern Hebrew etymology of coloring and camouflage associated with chameleons. This focus complicates a simple approach to the term, hoping to accomplish at least these interrelated objectives: to appreciate the moral dimension of the term in its various instantiations without reverting to the moralizing tendencies associated with moral philosophy, to offer a nuanced endorsement of some degree of hypocrisy in political life and as a form of passing, and to problematize the tendency by moral and political philosophers to analyze the term in terms of individual conduct. The common use of “*hypocrisy*” as a disapproving shorthand for behavior that might rankle some observers is both misguided and short-sighted: it fails to account for the complexity of human psyches and for the social dynamics that bring about and at times warrant such conduct. The present analysis does not shy away from moral considerations as they pertain to social, political, and economic institutions, but when doing so it attempts to avoid setting moralizing criteria or hierarchies with which to adjudicate degrees of hypocritical conduct. Instead, it is an attempt to answer the cavalier and dangerous mindset of post-truth promoters on the one hand, and the narrow and moralizing analyses of some analytic moral philosophers on the other. A critical philosophical approach that encompasses political, sociological, and psychological perspectives and insights might prove to be a potent tool with which to ward off cynicism and sanctimonious preaching.

I am writing this amid the coronavirus crisis, more specifically, the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Almost four years into the Trump presidency and some 20,000 public lies and misrepresentations later, a sense of urgency to think about hypocrisy remains as evident as it was when I began working on this book three years ago. The Trump Administration’s performance throughout the crisis catapults its blindness to its moral responsibility to unthinkable heights. Questions about the fairness of health care provision across the nation are subverted and at times

completely ignored for the sake of rhetorical grandstanding, partisan politics, and the right to absolute and capricious choice. Individual liberty is taken up as a political category that upends the safety of and care for the health of the community. The false binary of public health and economic well-being is meant to escape critical engagement. I argue that the masking and unmasking of actors on the social and political stage in the hope of finding behind the mask an authentic self are relevant when people are masked to avoid spreading the virus, fearful of dying. When the threat of death saturates the public imagination, critical commentary on the difference between the Greek and Hebrew etymologies of *hypocrisy*, one about masking and the other about chameleon-like coloring, though somewhat esoteric may turn out to be informative. Who would care about hypocrisy in times of crisis? To some extent, there is never a “proper” time for critique. (Brown 2005) Perhaps the present critique of hypocrisy, one that glosses over the obvious cases and delves into deeper philosophical, sociological, and psychological regions, may appear untimely. But because the Greek etymology of critique is about conditions of crisis, there may be no better time to engage this with some moral standards against which human speech and conduct are assessed. In times of crisis, every word and gesture counts, especially if undertaken by political leaders hungry for attention.

American hypocrisy dates at least to the beginning of the republic, its “founding fathers” having promoted independence and autonomy, liberty and equality, while importing and enslaving human beings from the African continent or, in the case of Thomas Jefferson, “breeding” slaves for sale. The language of the European Enlightenment notwithstanding, the founding documents of the republic exemplify the hypocrisy that permeates the Enlightenment in promoting ideals that are blind to the realities of racism, sexism, and settler colonialism. Parallels to this kind of national hypocrisy can be found as well in the discrepancy between the French Revolution and its documents about egalitarian principles and the realities of inequalities and colonialism, exemplified in the case of the Haitian slave rebellion in 1791 and its repercussion. (Piketty 2020) The Trumpian age’s numerous cases of political hypocrisy are more unapologetically systemic than has been the case for some time. With the global pandemic still in full force, the ongoing discrimination of people of color, leading to their disproportionate susceptibility to contagion but also to their elevated death toll, is manifest. The double standards facing people of color that should have long ago been exposed and overcome, perhaps

denounced as hypocritical, continue to permeate the long history of discrimination despite claims of equality, criminalization despite claims of fairness, and disproportionate incarceration rates despite claims of liberty. Wealth and income inequalities have affected them and other poor people more drastically in this crisis as in every crisis before; continuous institutional discrimination exacts its toll from one generation to the next. Even when governors require facemasks, Black citizens are suspected as potential criminals while their white counterparts are congratulated for behaving responsibly. It never ends. The annual celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday is no substitute for any real political will.

The specter of hypocrisy and its contemporary effects spans from race relations in America to class warfare waged in the age of Trump through immigration policies and tax reforms. As the pandemic is tearing through the hypercapitalist structure of the American landscape, food supply chains are weakened and we fear some of them might come to a halt. To ensure the supply of California produce, for example, some undocumented Mexican immigrant farmworkers are being designated “essential” while the threat of deportation is temporarily lifted. In U.S. House Representative Veronica Escobar’s words: “The hypocrisy within America is that we want the fruits of their undocumented labor, but we want to give them nothing in return.” (Corchado 2020) The Trumpian mantra of the danger of illegal immigrants in our midst has been replaced with their essential contribution to the American diet and well-being in this time of crisis. Hypocrisy is a rhetorical shorthand for the malleability of policies in complete disregard of an espoused ideology. Across the Atlantic, Scotland’s chief medical officer, Dr. Catherine Calderwood, resigned on April 4, 2020, because she failed to obey her own lockdown orders during the pandemic and drove twice within ten days to visit her second home on the east coast of the country. In her press conference, she explicitly used the word *hypocrisy* to describe behavior for which she apologized and then resigned her post. However random this example, since so many others are readily available, it is clear that hypocrisy, unlike some other slurs or denunciations, has a certain moral gravitas that once expressed in public cannot be ignored (unless you are a sociopath like President Trump). It is unlike other accusations, such as liar or thief that can be explained away or countered, with evidence about the truth in the first case or book-keeping in the second. Once labeled a hypocrite, one must marshal all the moral arsenal at one’s disposal to refute the claim without doubling down and suffering even further humiliation. Dr. Calderwood resigned, as

might have been expected retrospectively of all the signers of the American Constitution, because she recognized her moral failing in violating the covenant she swore to uphold with her community.

When the moral texture is highlighted in social and political contexts, it reminds participants of their shared and contested beliefs about morality and commitments that are neglected and others that deserve attention. One of the problems with the reflexive turn to *rights* language heard in the age of Trump—the right to defy official orders to wear a mask or stay at home, or the right to open one’s business regardless of health concerns—is that it has the veneer of principled argumentation but in fact is undertaken in bad faith; it is in this sense hypocritical more often than not. The so-called right not to wear masks in public loses its credibility when the risk of contagion is scientifically verifiable. What is left unsaid is the moral claim for individuality over community, personal tastes and preferences over the health and well-being of the community. In short, the charge of hypocrisy is not limited to the loss of sincerity and the integrity of the subject on any stage; rather it is about flagging different modes of constructing, affirming, dismissing, and wrecking social and political relationships, or about disappointed expectations, falling short of ideals and not wanting to accept our and others’ shortcomings. As will become clear by the end of this book, the social bonds exemplified in friendships are guided by shared moral convictions. These moral convictions are not ancillary but essential for bringing and keeping communities together. Perhaps the charge of hypocrisy can play the role of guiding community members to tend to these moral principles, however abstract they may seem at first. Without critical analysis, any hope for community building may fade in the face of a cynical acquiescence that hypocrisy is ubiquitous and that we are all hypocrites some of the time.

I have divided my analyses about hypocrisy into five chapters, each with its own focus; their imbrication is deliberate and moves from the philosophical to the political and the social all the way through the psychosocial to the religious and personal.

Chapter 1 examines the classical philosophical binaries of truths and lies, philosophy and sophistry. These binaries overstate their case for the radical and easily demarcated difference between the terms they hold as opposites. In their stead, thinking about *degrees of truth* rather than truths and lies or truth and post-truth may obviate potential misunderstanding or judgments based on idealized conceptions of their distinctions. This way of thinking parallels the notion of degrees of civility, from brutal

honesty to compassionate honesty to decency and manners among friends and strangers. At stake in this reading is the sensitivity required in any context. Two interrelated presuppositions undergird the points of this chapter. The first assumes that if binary oppositions are the poles of a spectrum of possibilities, anyone at any time is bound to be somewhere along this spectrum and never fully on one extreme or the other. The second incorporates the dialectical and postmodern notion of post-truth as including truths and lies rather than an admission that the quest for truth, however problematic, is altogether relinquished. To think of *degrees of hypocrisy* in light of degrees of truth refuses the simple and perhaps simple-minded rush to label this or that trivial manifestation of hypocrisy, and demands a more nuanced approach to the conditions that may or may not warrant the label of hypocrisy.

Chapter 2 examines the Greek and Hebrew etymologies of hypocrisy, the former related to stage acting and the wearing of masks, while the latter concerns blending into one's environment in chameleon-like behavior. Using five case studies that on their face exhibit the characteristics of deception and pretense, manipulation and gaining advantage over others, the two different etymologies are deployed to sharpen the contrast between their applicability. Stage actors openly wear their masks and alert their audiences that they are not accountable for their stage performance outside the theater. Chameleons use camouflage to remain undetected and have greater latitude in adapting to different environments. Though both represent hypocrisy, when politicians don masks like actors they are more readily vilified than when they adjust themselves to their stage like chameleons, whose evolutionary strategies are deemed morally neutral, perhaps even ingenious. Alternatively, the camouflage of the chameleon may introduce gradations of moral justifications for survival under certain circumstances, while judgments about the masking and unmasking of hypocrites remain rigid across contexts. These interpretations need not tip the scales of judgment to one direction of the etymology of the term *hypocrisy* or the other, but they could supplement each other. Keeping in mind a variety of interpretations might thwart snap judgments and encourage more considered, perhaps messier ones.

Chapter 3 delves into the political realm where hypocrisy is most likely to be detected and publicly condemned. In this register, at stake are policy choices and coalition building that require the art of persuasion. Whether the deliberations are domestic or international, their purpose is to yield political results that at times require compromises. Here, too,

different kinds of compromise warrant different moral judgments. Hypocritical conduct in this context may be understood on a spectrum of possibilities, some acceptable and others contemptible. Political realities highlight not only different kinds of hypocrisy but underscore some of their positive implementations. Some hypocrisies are justifiable, even essential for political purposes, and therefore they deserve to be critically examined. Political realities also reveal the discursive limitations of hypocrisy as a blunt moral weapon with which to dissect the intricacies of statecraft. When politicians appear hypocritical, they may be performing well and treating their constituents and political allies and rivals much better than if they remained steadfast in their consistent adherence to principles. And when citizens appear to conform to the social and cultural conventions and norms of their communities, they cannot help but fall into the alluring trap of civilized hypocrisy, where their instincts and desires are repressed, where social and moral demands cannot always be fulfilled. Sociality may necessitate compromise, but it does not demand hypocrisy.

Chapter 4 moves from the political discourse of state actors to the psychological discourse that inquires about individuals and their capacity to participate in affairs of state. Not only must they reconcile the civilized hypocrisy of conformity and professional role playing assigned to them by the community, they are also presumed to fit some Cartesian–Kantian model of the self as a unified and consistent subject or agent whose conduct can be judged against a standard of hypocrisy. This model is contrasted with the psychoanalytic and neuroscientific models that question the uniformity of the self. If the self cannot be known, and if there is no ontological self prior to its unfolding in language, how is it possible to claim the absence of authenticity in the name of hypocrisy? Similarly, if the mind has multiple modules with different functionalities that respond in evolutionary terms to different survival threats and needs and therefore is at times inconsistent, is the charge of inconsistency the most relevant or salient for accusations of hypocrisy? Even if hypocrisy seems too blunt a term to be affixed to individuals, it might still serve as a deterrent for immoral and antisocial behavior.

Chapter 5 begins with a brief mention of the religious denunciation of hypocrisy as behavior sinful toward the divine and injurious to fellow humans. This seems a relevant brief detour insofar as moral condemnations rely on fixed moral ideals, some of which are traceable to religious sacred texts. Questions of passing and code-switching are essential strategies for survival available to oppressed minorities. Victim hypocrisy as a

response to threatening and discriminatory treatment has been morally justified for centuries. The moral register is never far removed from discussions of human conduct and when historically studied calls for rethinking such judgments. If the fear of being labeled a hypocrite fosters trust, it might be necessary for human relations and interactions. Barring an appeal to the divine or some nebulous appeal to solidarity and empathy, perhaps what remains is the appeal to virtues and the virtue of friendship. Virtuous friends might be in a position to critically challenge the conduct of their friends with honesty and goodwill. No matter the judgment, such a challenge is a useful lifeline that has the potential to ensure the well-being of a community.

In conclusion, it seems that the concept of hypocrisy is suspended between irrelevance because of misguided charges and idealized aspirations that cannot be actualized. This suspension is important in the present age because it bespeaks of the persistence of the charge of hypocrisy. The ubiquity and cavalier dismissal of the charge of hypocrisy in the age of Trump has not completely erased the fear associated with this charge, the fear that as hard as one tries, there is always the prospect that something could be characterized as hypocritical even when the best effort is made to remain mindful and aware of social perceptions. Unlike Jacques Derrida's specters of Jacques Derrida (1994) and Karl Marx's specter of communism (1848), the first in the temporal sense of ghostly retrieval of the past as disturbing the present and the second as promising a revolutionary moment in the future, my use of *specter* is intended in a more limited sense of a moral haunting of an invisible but omnipresent (perhaps "impartial" in Adam Smith's (1759) sense) spectator who is lurking around everywhere. As overused a term as hypocrisy may seem now, its specter is "an apparition, phantom, or ghost, especially one of a terrifying nature or aspect," the kind that terrifies perhaps most profoundly insofar as it is "produced by reflection." (*OED*) The specter of hypocrisy terrifies when we reflect on what we have done, how we have done it, and for what purpose. The terror accompanying hypocritical conduct depends on the potency of the charge of hypocrisy to prevent harm and ensure sociality. The endurance of this specter deserves reflection, especially in an age when hypocrisy is often simply ignored or taken for granted as a vice. In different contexts, the charge of hypocrisy not only changes its meaning but also makes it clear that it appeals to different standards. The reflective mode that is being called forth in this book reminds those who charge some conduct to be hypocritical that

this charge engages moral principles that ought to be made explicit and critically evaluated rather than presumed as incontestable.

As I complete this book, I am painfully aware that most of my arguments are partial and require elaboration, relying as they are on the insights of others and overlooking many more sources that deserve more attention than accorded here. I readily admit that the obligations to read more, to read more carefully, and to spend more time elucidating the ideas of others while synthesizing them as clearly as possible have not been fully realized here. The exercise, I must admit, has been therapeutic and humbling, appreciating along the way not to judge too harshly or quickly, but to be as generous as one can be with friends and strangers who live in especially precarious times.

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CHAPTER 1

Degrees of Truth

Abstract *This chapter* examines the classical philosophical binaries of truths and lies, philosophy and sophistry. These binaries overstate their case and in their stead, thinking about *degrees of truth* rather than truths and lies or truth and post-truth obviates potential misunderstanding or judgments. At stake in this reading is the sensitivity required of judging within contexts. This sensitivity incorporates the dialectical and post-modern notion of post-truth as including truths and lies rather than an admission that the quest for truth, however problematic, is altogether relinquished. To think of *degrees of hypocrisy* in light of degrees of truth refuses the simple and perhaps simple-minded rush to label trivial manifestation of hypocrisy and demands a more nuanced approach to the conditions that may or may not warrant the label of hypocrisy.

1.1 THE CONTEXT OF POST-TRUTH: THE TRUMPIAN AGE

George Orwell reminds us in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that the regime of Big Brother and its use of *doublethink* “means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.” (1981/1949, 176) If logic was supposed to preserve some modicum of clarity and ascertain truth claims, under fascism and totalitarianism it loses its power. This is the case in Orwell’s dystopian novel because the party controls the historical record, erasing inconvenient facts and adding others, so that the distinction between truths and lies becomes blurred. As Orwell says, the “past was erased, the erasure was forgotten,

the lie became truth.” (ibid., 64) If official assertions are deemed truthful only because they are sanctioned by those who authored them, what is the point of quibbling over logical nuances and empirical evidence and testimonies? Any challenge in Orwell’s fictive world is bound to end in either dismissal or persecution, gulags established by the likes of Stalin and his henchmen or concentration camps set up by Hitler and the Gestapo. President Trump has relegated anything he fears or disagrees with as “fake news” to discredit it as unworthy of the traditional critical examination accorded to public claims and statements of fact, following the slippery slope that turns democracies into totalitarian regimes. Herein lies the concern of this book: it is not that the Trump Administration will ignore dissent and send dissenters to the gulags or concentration camps, but that it will empty public discourse of the richness of debate and deliberation, where conventional reference to evidence and truth telling are sacrosanct. In other words, without some basic agreement about the boundary conditions that inform communication as a starting point, agreements and disagreements are reduced to personal preferences and power moves.

Becoming popular with Brexit and continuing into the Trump era, “post-truth” was dubbed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* its word of the year in 2016. Post-truth must be taken seriously not only by journalists who cover current political development but also by philosophers. On one level, this term takes us back to the classical Socratic distinction between sophistry and philosophy, and on another, there is something more insidious and frightening akin to the dystopia envisioned by Orwell. The specter of truth haunts the contemporary political stage, relentlessly being dismissed while never quite leaving the stage, demanding, as it were, to remain at the center of every debate, whether about the scientific data informing the fight against coronavirus contagion or foreign relations with adversaries. On another level, this point of obfuscation about the truth and perhaps relativism run amok was an unintended consequence of the challenges to every scientific claim for its hold on truth and certainty. To speak of hypocrisy in the moral register requires speaking about truth telling and the conditions under which a statement is deemed true. Philosophers have traditionally played a central role in investigating the conditions that distinguish true statements from false ones, both on logical and empirical grounds. Their investigations established the ground rules for communication so that misrepresentations could be corrected rather than, in the Orwellian fictive world, become part of a fabricated historical record. In this sense, epistemological questions become moral

questions as well: statements that cannot be critically examined and refuse rectification can turn into deliberate deceptions. The post-truth condition requires the kind of epistemological and moral vigilance that would undergird the engagement with the specter of hypocrisy. The community of science studies has traditionally scrutinized the privilege accorded the natural sciences as the explorers of knowledge and the guardians of its truth claims. This critical scrutiny linked epistemological concerns with social and moral ones as they apprise public policy.

As one of its leaders, Bruno Latour reminds the community of science studies writ large (sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists who endorse some version of deconstruction, poststructuralism, or postmodernism) that it may be indirectly responsible for the current misunderstanding of how to deal with critical engagements, but not for the perniciousness of our post-truth predicament. To someone unfamiliar with the critiques of scientific certainty, these critiques may seem to legitimate the dismissal of empirical data, evidence-based statements, and the means by which scientific claims are deemed to be credible or true. Is this “gullible criticism,” indeed, “a case of radicalism gone mad”? (Latour 2004, 231) Latour’s lament suggests that the “question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism.” (ibid.; italics in the original) There is a difference between bad critique contesting the facticity of scientific “facts” and good science studies wanting to “get closer” to facts. For science studies scholars, the facticity of facts and the grounds on which they are established (epistemology) is only one part of the story; the other, even more crucial part is concerned with the horrors inflicted on people, animals, and the planet when facts are deliberately or accidentally misconstrued and are uncritically accepted (morality). In this rendering, an earlier concern with the “two dogmas of empiricism,” introduced two generations earlier by the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine comes to mind. The first “dogma” or belief suggests that there is “some fundamental cleavage” between truths that are *analytic* (“grounded in meanings independent of matters of fact”) and those that are *synthetic* (“grounded in fact”). (1961, 20) The second dogma is *reductionism*: “the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience.” (ibid.) In questioning the validity of these two sets of belief, the one about the meanings that depend on facts and the other about the logical structure of language, Quine deliberately blurs the boundary between “speculative metaphysics

and natural science.” (ibid.) His own pragmatic approach argues for the inherent interpretive dimension of every statement about human experience and thereby problematizes the epistemological conditions under which a community of inquirers reaches an agreement about truth claims.

As Quine concedes, the “myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior” to myths about gods and fairies that control nature because it has “proven more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.” (ibid., 44) The efficacy in question here differs from an appeal to a direct and unencumbered perception and knowledge of facts; instead, it relies on the continuous interpretation and inscription of meaning to statements about matters of fact, allowing for the changing truth status of statements (given new evidence). Quine’s concession to degrees of truth about knowledge claims and Latour’s concern to get “closer” to facts in order to ascertain their truth-value are supposed to reassure the scientific community and the public that the truth about our knowledge claims is still worthy of pursuit. There are others, like Steve Fuller, who seem to have given up on the quest for truth altogether and give credence to the Orwellian nightmare we observe in the Trumpian age. As a leading British sociologist of science and advocate of social epistemology (all knowledge is socially constructed), Fuller offers academic legitimacy to a dismissive way of thinking about truth claims and the conditions under which they ought to be scrutinized. His promotion of post-truth circumvents the critical analysis of truth conditions in favor of a plurality of opinions that in turn need not defend themselves in any epistemological court. (2018, Chapter 1) This approach exploits Quine’s analysis of the dogmas of empiricism and Latour’s lament over losing touch with empirical facts and cynically presents itself as the guardian of populist common sense. With a Trump-like glee, the likes of Fuller present themselves as rebellious mavericks and iconoclasts fighting against the privileged elites whose insular scientific discourse is deployed by experts to pontificate over authoritative consensus claims.

At stake is no longer an internal debate among scientists and philosophers over knowledge claims and their truth-value, but the very possibility of coherent deliberations over public policies. Given that what has been taken for granted about public communication can no longer be relied on, it is worthwhile to revisit the classic philosophical concerns with ontology and epistemology. These concerns point to the danger of critical engagement deteriorating into skepticism and relativism. To avoid ending

with outright cynicism about the possibility of knowing anything at all, it would behoove us to agree, however tentatively and by convention, that in order to pursue the truth about empirical data (for personal reasons or policy purposes) a community (of inquirers) must share a common ground or some ground rules of communication.

Revisiting the question of what counts as truth telling takes us back to Socrates' ongoing battle with the sophists of his day. Some have argued that the line of demarcation between philosophy and sophistry is clear, almost sacrosanct. The standard argument goes like this: "philosophy" (*φιλοσοφία* *filosofía*) claims as its end the love of wisdom and therefore of knowledge and truth, while "sophistry" (*σοφιστεία* *sofisteía*) uses fallacious arguments and deceptive techniques to win debates. It is interesting that the Latin *sophista* (and *sophists*) refers to someone who makes use of fallacious arguments and to "a master of one's craft; a wise or prudent man, one clever in matters of daily life," the first with negative and the second with positive connotations. The addition of "clever" in the second could have a negative connotation as well if it were meant to contrast with the "wise" of *wisdom*. In any case, *sophistry* becomes in Socrates' hands a contemptuous and pejorative label to distinguish those clever (even if wise) craftsmen from the philosophers whose love of wisdom has no pecuniary rewards. (*Century Dictionary*) Socrates' derisive comments about sophistry are usually presented as part of his unwavering commitment to the truth, the love of wisdom at all costs, and his famous claim that sophists are paid to twist meanings to suit their paying masters (*Gorgias*). Aristotle continues in this vein to define sophistry as "wisdom in appearance only" (*Metaphysics*). In Socrates' denunciation of sophistry in general and the sophists as his sworn enemies there is a subtle acknowledgment of the knotty relationship between the seeker of truth and wisdom and the one who claims to have gained it. During his trial, Socrates suggests he is the wisest man alive because he knows what he does not know, admitting to the limitations of his knowledge (*Apology*). The sophists, by contrast, are pretentious: they pretend to know what they, by definition, cannot know, that is, the truth. They may know something, as Socrates admits he does as well, but their knowledge consists of the tricks of the game of learning and the rhetorical skills with which to persuade their listeners. Philosophers and sophists alike use rhetorical devices and are therefore rhetoricians and orators, attempting to persuade their audiences. The difference between philosophers and the sophists, then, lies in

their respective intentions: some seek truth, the others seek to win arguments. The rhetorical skills will not get one to the truth, though they will help win arguments. The lawyer as sophist thus seeks to argue the case as persuasively as possible, even when this results in exonerating the guilty and indicting the innocent.

My reading of Socrates detects a certain concern with hypocrisy—deception and pretense, self-deception, and the deliberate manipulation of an audience (even of one)—conveniently leveled against sophists but exempting philosophers. (see some of this in Dupriez 1991) But is the charge of hypocrisy applicable in a case where sophists openly declare their intent to argue as powerfully as possible to win the hearts of their audience and win cases when paid to do so? In this sense, sophists are as honest about their trade as philosophers are, though their goals differ. Perhaps there is a confusion here between sophistry and rhetoric, a confusion that begins already with Socrates. As Edward Schiappa (1995) suggests (following *Gorgias* 465C), Socrates' sense of the mixture of the two relies on his observations about the methods used by the sophists. In selling their credentials and their expertise, sophists used rhetorical devices and the flourishes of logical argumentations to persuade their interlocutors, and in doing so, they had no interest in philosophical pursuits. If the name of the game is victory at all costs and if the game is political brinksmanship for the sake of amassing power, then any philosophical illusion about knowledge for knowledge's sake or the quest for the truth is beside the point. The genealogy of this recognition dates back to Roman emperors and later to Machiavelli (in the sixteenth century), Marx and Nietzsche (in the nineteenth century), Foucault and Lyotard (in the twentieth century), and reaches the advocates of the "playfulness" of post-truth games in the age of Trump and Brexit (in the twenty-first century). New discursive games may endanger the ones we have historically perceived insofar as they seem to refuse to engage at all with their interlocutors and critics. Cynical dismissal of different viewpoints by means of rhetorical entertainment violates the premise of critical deliberation established by philosophers. It is no longer the Socratic distinction between philosophy and sophistry that holds, but a distinction between deliberation and entertainment. Sophistry in the service of distraction needs no rules and evades the detection of falsehoods, since the truth is no longer at issue. The Trumpian age warrants a philosophical engagement not because philosophers can hold up truth criteria that would bring the 45th US president's fans to their senses, but because only within a

framework that respects truth seeking and truth telling, however problematic both remain, can a society hope to minimize the perils envisioned by Orwell's fictional dystopia and Hannah Arendt's scholarly treatise on totalitarianism (1951), as we shall see below.

Barbara Cassin, an important interpreter of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's work, moves the discussion of truths and lies to meaning production, which is exemplified within the psychoanalytic process. (2020, 25) As she does this, she explains that where truth was on the side of philosophy, now it is on the side of psychoanalysis (and sophistry, reconsidered). In her words, "from Freud to Lacan, we have moved decisively from the love of truth to the discourse of truth." (ibid., 27) This move modifies the quest for and love of truth as a hidden treasure to be uncovered. The search for and dialogic exposition of truth is taken out of the hands of philosophers and shifted to the interpretive mode of looking for meaning in the "discourse of truth" that is undertaken in the therapeutic context of psychoanalysis. The emphasis on the discursive process also announces the potential for the unconscious to show itself through speech and construct meaning whose discursive truth is announced as well. Unlike the Socratic dialogue that keeps the speakers teleologically focused, on track to find out what a concept means, in this case, speech produces meaning in its enfolding. Philosophers like Socrates seem to have an agenda and a dialogic method by which to accomplish it (even if it may be the case that Socrates himself really just enjoyed conversations and arguments for their own sake), in the psychoanalytic context, says Cassin, the "most splendid, original truths" emerge organically. Cassin argues that, according to Lacan, "discourse creates being, and this is why its meaning can only be grasped after the fact, in view of the world it has produced." (ibid., 35) In this sense, then, the truth is constructed and not uncovered. Without continuing to engage the intricacies of the psychoanalytic discourse and logic within clinical settings, it suffices here to say that it is clear that speech does not reveal or disclose or unveil the façade of the subject; it *brings into being one's being*. In short, there are "only interpretations and interpretations of interpretations." (ibid.) In other words, there is no philosophical essence or truth to be discovered or unmasked. Socrates himself had to admit that philosophy and sophistry were similar enough in order to insist on a difference, to *formulate* a difference and hope it would stick, even at his trial and even with an audience that was skeptical of anything he had to say in his own defense. Cassin's interrogation, by contrast, breaks down the Socratic

difference when it gets to constructing meaning (and truth) rather than searching for the Truth.

There is a radical difference between the Trumpian-like refusal to engage the criteria according to which to measure the truth-value of empirical or any other claims within the framework of public discourse and the debates over these criteria and their efficacy, whether they are constructed or transcendent. The rhetorical misappropriation of some of the more flamboyant rhetorical moves of self-proclaimed postmodernists, for example, does a grave disservice to public deliberation over worthwhile disagreements. Perhaps the most accessible, least nuanced work that carried the day at the time to discredit the privileged scientific discourse was written by Jean Baudrillard (1995) who suggested the Gulf War was nothing but a media hoax. After pronouncing this outlandish claim, it became difficult to defend the poststructuralists and deconstructionists who were making careful arguments about the effects of epistemological overreaching. The analytic wing of the philosophical community reacted with vehemence to Baudrillard's rhetorical (sophistic) maneuvers and found easy pickings. As one of their leading advocates, Harry Frankfurt, noted: "These shameless antagonists of common sense—members of a certain emblematic subgroup of them call themselves 'postmodernists'—rebelliously and self-righteously deny that truth has any genuinely objective reality at all. They therefore go on to deny that truth is worthy of any obligatory deference or respect." (2006, 18–19) Name calling ("shameless antagonists of common sense") as a substitute for an argument reeks of fallacious reasoning (*ad hominem*). Shifting from the descriptive ("rebellious") to the normative ("self-righteous") is the maneuver of someone trying to discredit an argument without fully laying it out. And confusing the legitimate critique of objectivity with a wholesale dismissal of truth as such is itself a shameless overstatement (similar in kind to Latour's own critique of critique), one anchored not in textual evidence but in speculation at best and plain aversion at worst to the point that intellectual "respect" is abandoned.

Had Frankfurt read the works of postmodernists or deconstructionists, he might have avoided committing logical fallacies in his judgment of their work. He would have learned that it is exactly their commitment to honesty (scientific and other) that motivates their scrutiny, that their interest in understanding and interpreting facts and evidence is both epistemological and ontological (in Quine's sense), and that when Jacques Derrida, for example, speaks of the limits of metaphysical language, he