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Resisting Hyper-Partisan Silencing: Arendt on Political Persuasion through Exemplification and Truth-Telling as Action

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Abstract: A central frustration of recent political discourse is the consistent reduction of politically relevant factual and critical speech to mere expression of partisan commitment. Partisans of “the other side”—members of the other tribe—are viewed as *de facto* wrong, because partisans, even when their speech invokes mere facts or purportedly shared political principles. Ideally, democratic political discourse operates along at least two central dimensions: a dimension of shared factual, historical, and political assumptions, and a more contested dimension of interpretation, prioritization, and evaluation that results in diverse and often competing understandings of what is good, and so of what is best to collectively pursue. Debates among advocates of competing conceptions of the good and partisans of diverse world views identifiable in terms of the second dimension are, on this picture, constrained and grounded by the shared factual and political commitments of the first, thus ensuring a meaningful basis for ongoing political engagement. While there is little reason to think this ideal has ever been perfectly realized, in recent political discourse statements that events have occurred, drugs are effective, or transparency is important in political conduct cannot seem to get uptake except as mere expressions of political partisanship any more than an actor on stage trying to convince her audience of the danger of a real fire that has broken out in the theater can get uptake for this claim except as an expression in a theatrical performance. In both cases, the real content and discursive intent of speech is undermined by the context in which it occurs. In the case of the actor on stage, the appropriate rules for uptake and interpretation are being followed, just to unfortunate effect. However, in the case of political discourse something seems to be wrong with the rules for uptake and interpretation that have come to dominate in many quarters. This essay relies on recent discussions of silencing and epistemic injustice to introduce the ideas of *partisan silencing* and *hyper-partisan silencing* in an attempt to say more precisely what has gone wrong with the rules for uptake and interpretation in political discourse. It then relies on Hannah Arendt’s analyses of truth and lies in politics to connect these phenomena to underlying features of political action and speech. Conditions of partisan and hyper-partisan silencing turn out to be a natural, if not inevitable, consequence of the relationship of truth-telling and deception to political action itself as Arendt understands this. Finally, the essay elaborates on two suggestive passages from Arendt’s 1967 essay “Truth and Politics” to propose potential strategies for resisting conditions of hyper-partisan silencing. Because hyper-partisan silencing itself imposes a certain discursive

logic, there are kinds of political speech and action that might succeed in being understood as sincere and so in being persuasive—even in the face of hyper-partisan silencing—precisely because they challenge the assumptions that underpin this discursive logic itself.

1. Introduction

This essay introduces *hyper-partisan silencing* as a type of epistemic injustice and makes use of Hannah Arendt’s analysis of truth, lying, and facts in politics to analyze, partially explain, and propose strategies for responding to conditions of hyper-partisan silencing. Part 2 introduces epistemic injustice and silencing, and uses these to introduce and characterize partisan and hyper-partisan silencing. Part 3 provides an overview of Arendt’s view of the nature, importance, and role of truth in politics, while Part 4 relies on Arendt’s account of lying and self-deception in politics to partially explain and illuminate the phenomenon of hyper-partisan silencing and the barriers it raises to legitimate political criticism and truth-telling. Finally, Part 5 draws on two suggestive passages from Arendt’s 1967 essay “Truth and Politics” to propose potential strategies for resisting conditions of hyper-partisan silencing.

2. Epistemic Injustice, Silencing, and Hyper-Partisan Silencing

2.1 Epistemic Injustice

Epistemic injustice occurs when an individual is wronged specifically (if not only) in their capacity as a knower—as a reasoning, judging, reflecting, believing being (Fricker 2007; Kidd et al. 2017). All forms of epistemic injustice tend to gradually erode a subject’s trust in herself as an epistemic agent—as a competent reasoner, evaluator, and judge (Fricker 2007, chs. 2.3 and 6). It is thus particularly pernicious because it directly and indirectly damages capacities that are central to human personhood (direct damage to an agent’s self-trust will indirectly damage also, for example, her abilities to think and act morally, and to cultivate meaningful and trusting social relationships). For purposes of this essay, what Fricker has called *testimonial injustice* is most relevant.¹

Testimonial injustice occurs when an individual’s testimony is not given the credence it deserves due to *identity prejudice*—a negative identity stereotype of members of the group the individual belongs to that is sustained by morally problematic motivations or commitments—on the part of the hearer(s).

Fricker’s central example of a testimonial injustice is the trial of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Tom, an African American, has been accused of assaulting a young white woman, Mayella Ewell. At the trial, Tom’s lawyer, Atticus Finch, does an impressive job of undermining the accusations against Tom: he both marshals exculpatory evidence and discredits the prosecution’s testimony. Tom himself provides a sincere and plausible account of what happened. However, he is convicted. On Fricker’s analysis, Tom Robinson suffers a testimonial epistemic injustice. What he has to

¹ Other kinds of epistemic injustice include hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007) and gaslighting (Abramson 2014; Spear 2019).

say about how the world is and how it should be understood is not given the epistemic credit it deserves because the members of his all-white jury harbor negative identity prejudices against African Americans to the effect that they are not trustworthy, not epistemically competent, or both. Counterfactually, had the trial happened just as it did, keeping the charges, the testimony etc. constant, and changing only Tom Robinson's skin color, the suggestion is that he would have been acquitted, or at least that his testimony would have carried much greater weight with the jury.

As Fricker discusses the issue, testimonial injustice occurs anytime an individual is not given the epistemic credit that they deserve due to the hearer having prejudices concerning a group to which the individual belongs. Epistemic injustice is thus likely to occur against groups that already suffer other kinds of problematic stigma in society, particularly minorities and women. However, any identifiable social group could potentially be a target, and different social groups may have different negative identity prejudices. My interest here is in the idea that political partisans are likely to have or be tempted by negative identity prejudices against those who hold alternative views, and especially against political opponents, making the realm of partisan politics a ripe one for the commission of a kind of testimonial injustice.

2.2 Silencing

Testimonial injustice is arguably a kind of *silencing*. There is a significant literature on silencing and I will not deal with all of it here (McKinnon 1987, 1993; Hornsby 1993, 1994; Langton 1993; Langton & Hornsby 1998; Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011; McGowan 2014). However, the central idea of silencing is that one's voice, what one says and attempts to communicate with others, is not heard, or is heard but ignored, misconstrued, misunderstood, or not taken seriously. Typically, it is not enough for this to happen on just a single occasion, by accident, or due to merely circumstantial factors (I may not be heard on a given occasion simply because loud music is playing in the background or because my interlocutor is distracted—this is not silencing). Rather, the treatment is triggered by something about the individual or group identity of the person who is silenced. Silencing thus typically tracks identities and social relations, and does so across one or more important social contexts. Much of the literature on silencing focuses on women's speech, and on the ways that it is not permitted, acknowledged, understood, or accepted in key institutional and interpersonal contexts, including speech-acts as diverse as contributing ideas to a discussion at a business meeting on the one hand, and expressions and refusals of sexual consent on the other.

The experience of silencing is well-capture by the use Rae Langton makes of an example originally offered by Donald Davidson.² In the example, an actor is playing a part in a play that requires him to exclaim that there is a fire in the theater, and to try to warn the audience. Just before the relevant scene a *real* fire breaks out, and the actor rushes onto stage to warn the audience. Given the conventions governing the stage and

² On p. 49 of *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*, Rae Langton cites the example from Donald Davidson, acknowledging that Davidson had in mind a different question in its original context, "Communication and Convention", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 269.

utterances made there, however, the actor cannot get the audience to take his exclamations seriously. He cannot succeed in communicating a genuine warning rather than a line that is part of the play, and the reason he fails has something to do with the role he plays and with the rules governing how to interpret what actors say and what to believe (or not believe) as a result. Like Davidson's actor, one experiences silencing when one wants to communicate something to others, but one's words are ignored, misconstrued, or disbelieved because of the role one plays in a particular institutional context, or because of some aspect of one's individual or group identity.

Simplifying somewhat, the precise relationship between testimonial injustice and silencing depends on whether silencing is first and foremost an issue relating to credibility taken as an *epistemic* notion (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011), or to the conditions for successful expression and uptake of different kinds of speech-acts, a *linguistic* notion (Hornsby; Langton 2009). On the first way of reading silencing, it involves hearing what someone says and understanding it, but not viewing them as sufficiently credible to be believed. This is arguably what happened to Tom Robinson at his trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The jury heard what he said, but did not view him as competent or trustworthy enough to be believed. On the second reading of silencing, the issue is not first and foremost an epistemic credibility judgment, but rather a failure to treat the speaker as having engaged in full-fledged communicative speech in the first place, or at least as having engaged in the speech that they themselves intended to engage in.

The latter view is at the heart of the approach to silencing taken by Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby (1998). Basing their analysis in speech-act theory,³ Langton and Hornsby stress that what an individual accomplishes with a given speech-act depends on linguistic factors, the speaker's intentions, the context of utterance, and also on the way that all of these are received and interpreted by her hearer, her interlocutor. Hornsby introduces a primitive notion, *reciprocity*, which is a relational stance between a speaker and a hearer such that they view each other *as communicators*. Reciprocity typically exists between speakers. What Hornsby and Langton suggest, however, is that this is not always the case, and that silencing in its most fundamental sense occurs when, e.g. a man does not view a woman with reciprocity and so her utterance of 'no' is not taken, or not completely taken, as the expression of a participant communicator expressing refusal to begin with.

Fricker, in her discussion of testimonial epistemic injustice and silencing, focuses her analysis on the lack of epistemic credibility that is afforded a speaker due to her belonging to a certain group. On Fricker's view, membership in a group against which negative identity prejudices exist results in a kind of objectification or dehumanization of that group which corresponds to a credibility deficit: people "like that" are typically not informed, or are typically not sincere, so should not be believed.⁴ While being a member of a group that suffers from a prejudicially motivated credibility deficit means that one is likely not going to be asked for information in the first place, when one is asked (or chooses to speak anyway) what one says is heard and understood, it is simply *not*

3 Developed in early works by Edmund Husserl and especially Adolf Reinach, and more recently by J.L. Austen and John Searle.

4 Kristie Dotson (2011) develops a similar idea from slightly different starting points in her discussion of "quieting silencing".

believed. For Fricker, both not being asked at all due to negative identity prejudice and not being believed due to negative identity prejudice count as silencing (217, pp. 141-2).

Mary Kate McGowan has proposed recognizing a kind of silencing that I believe can be read as a hybrid of the Langton-Hornsby and of the Fricker views, what she calls “sincerity silencing” (McGowan 2014). Part of the intention of a speaker when they perform a speech-act is, roughly, the kind of speech-act they mean to perform when they say something. Thus, in the context of a dinner party, the host’s utterance ‘there are more forks’ (while looking around furtively at the guests as the cake arrives at the table) is not merely a declarative sentence communicating the fact that there are more forks, but also an *offer* of an additional fork or a clean fork to those who may be in need, and is intended to communicate this. This illocutionary act is successful if the guests understand this. McGowan suggests that the *sincerity condition* is something additional, amounting to the question of whether the speaker intends to follow through on what their speech-act in fact commits them to. The foregoing utterance would be a successful speech-act of *informing* and *offering* so long as the guests understood what was intended; it would still be *insincere* if the host had no actual intention of following through on the offer of more forks should one of the guests take him up on it.⁵ Thus, for McGowan, silencing can occur either (as Langton and Hornsby would have it) due to a fundamental or systemic failure of reciprocity in the hearer, or due to a failure in the hearer to view the speaker as sincere in what she has otherwise succeeded in saying and communicating.⁶

For my purposes, the central significance of McGowan’s recognition of a sincerity condition on speech-acts to the discussion of silencing is that the notion of sincerity can function as a kind of bridge between the speech-act account of silencing offered by Langton and Hornsby and the “credibility-deficit” account offered (or co-offered, since the two are not strictly exclusive) by Fricker. Sincerity is a central ingredient in most accounts of trustworthy testimony. One reason a speaker’s utterance may not be viewed as sincere is because they belong to a group that is prejudicially viewed as insincere, and if their word is then not believed or is taken less seriously for this reason, it seems clear that they suffer both a testimonial epistemic injustice *and* sincerity silencing in McGowan’s sense of this term.

In what follows I will thus understand *silencing* to mean that someone is viewed (and treated) as *insincere* across some range of significant discourse and knowledge

5 As McGowan puts it in relation to promising: “This distinction between the illocutionary intention and the sincerity intention can be seen easily and clearly in the case of promises. It is one thing to intend for one’s utterance to be a promise. This involves intending to undertake an obligation to perform the future action promised. This is the illocutionary intention. It is quite another thing to intend to keep that promise, which requires actually intending to perform the future action in question. This is the sincerity intention. As one can see, the illocutionary intention (to promise) is distinct from the sincerity intention (to keep the promise)” (2014, p. 460).

6 On McGowan’s account then, in the case where a man does not heed a woman’s refusal of sexual advances by uttering ‘no’, there are three distinct possibilities (2014, 462-3). One is that the man simply does not view her with reciprocity on this matter, does not view her as a subject capable of communicating to begin with. On this view, essentially that of Hornsby and Langton, the woman’s illocutionary act fails to get uptake at all. A second possibility is that the woman’s illocutionary act *is* successful, the man understands that she says “no” and means (illocutionary act) to communicate a refusal thereby. However, he takes her to be insincere. Not to really be committed to the speech-act she has in fact successfully performed. Third and finally, of course, it is a possibility that the man hears her, understands her, takes her to be sincere, but proceeds to ignore her anyway. This last is clearly a moral violation, but it is not strictly a case of silencing.

contribution contexts due to aspects of their perceived or actual individual or group identity. As a result, their attempts at speech are not listened to or seriously engaged.

2.3 Partisan Political Silencing as Epistemic Injustice

What I call *partisan silencing* occurs when a person engaged in political discourse asserts clear facts or appeals to principles that are nominally common ones, but is not engaged by fellow citizens or political opponents at the level of facts or reasons, instead being dismissed as making their assertion *entirely for the sake of* achieving partisan ends. When this occurs, it is as though the very fact of having political convictions or projects at all is taken to disqualify one as a legitimate interlocutor concerning the facts, values, and goals of political life.⁷ I call this sort of treatment partisan silencing,

Partisan silencing: a kind of testimonial epistemic injustice and sincerity silencing that occurs when an individual fails to get uptake or credibility when appealing to factual information, purportedly shared political principles and standards, or reasoned critique because of a negative identity prejudice in the hearer(s) that attaches to the individual's perceived or actual partisan affiliation, where that affiliation in some way contradicts the hearer's own commitments. Partisan identity prejudice results in the speaker's discursive attempts being interpreted as *insincere* because motivated by commitment to partisan goals—despite their explicit content or reasoning—and therefore as not *credible*.

As characterized here, partisan silencing proper is internalized (not a mere rhetorical strategy), and is indexed to individuals holding particular partisan views (or who are perceived as holding such views). Partisans of the same views and positions cannot, given the foregoing characterization, typically have negative identity prejudices that result in partisan silencing concerning each other.⁸ The key feature of partisan silencing is that it happens in response to interlocutors expressing what are or are perceived to be political commitments that *run counter to* those of the hearer(s). It is not politically relevant speech *as such* that is silenced by partisan silencing, but politically relevant speech that runs counter to the hearer(s)' pre-existing political commitments.

While partisan silencing can be an individual affair, where a single individual harbors negative identity prejudices attaching to partisan groups and so silences their members by

⁷ There is a sense in which the structure of the problem I am interested in is simply a version of the *tu quoque circumstantial fallacy*: where a listener *L* responds to the statement, argument, or reasoning that a speaker *S* has provided by pointing to some feature of *S*'s circumstances, in this case *S*'s partisan political commitments, that might be furthered, served, or sustained if what *S* said is accepted, and inferring from this that what *S* said must be false, or the reasoning and considerations offered illegitimate. However, I am interested in cases where this reasoning has become both internalized and systematic.

⁸ Though I will not focus on it here, I do think it is meaningful to identify what might be called “reverse partisan silencing” (“partisan credibility amplification”?), where an individual receives *uptake* and enhanced (rather than diminished) *credibility* from another *solely* due to perceived or actual partisan affiliation (presumably a shared one). In both cases, an authentic attempt at political discourse is effaced as a result of pre-existing partisan identity-prejudices and a political community where the phenomenon is widespread will likely undergo a significant decrease in the quality of their intellectual discourse and in the role of respect for facts and shared political principles.

viewing their speech as insincere, this by itself would be a rather weak form of silencing. Partisan silencing in its paradigmatic form requires that it be practiced (i) collectively, or (ii) in contexts where there is a power differential favoring the silencer(s). The power differential may be due simply to numbers (in which case (i) and (ii) overlap), or it may be due to differences in the institutional role occupied by the silencer(s). Thus, a law student who holds conservative views might be silenced in class discussion by her predominantly liberal classmates. Her defense of certain views revealing her “conservative identity”, and so causing her identity-prejudiced classmates to discount what she says in support of those views from the beginning, thus silencing her.⁹ In this case it is first and foremost numbers that are doing the work, though if the professor joins in the silencing there is a power differential operating as well. In another example, the well-funded and widespread effort to produce a public association of advocacy for a political response to climate change with alarmism, unreasonableness, or disingenuous ulterior motives, and to associate all of this with the political left, is a largely effective attempt (at least in the United States) to silence speech offering actual evidence, arguments, and political reasoning about climate change when these come from identifiably left-leaning politicians (McIntyre 2016, ch. 4; O’Connor & Weatherall 2019, chs. 3 & 4).

In recent U.S. politics, an example of partisan silencing is Republican President Donald Trump’s dismissal of Democratic criticism of his efforts in confronting the coronavirus pandemic beginning in February of 2020. Trump responded to the Democratic criticism by saying it had become their “single talking point”, that “Democrats will always say horrible things” and that “Democrats want us to fail so badly”.¹⁰ More generally, the Trump Administration’s systematic criticism of the judiciary,¹¹ of the “fake news” media and press,¹² and of the academy¹³ as partisan agents whose decisions, reporting, reasoning, and criticism are therefore insincere and so to be dismissed are

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- 9 With this example I mean to suggest one possibility for how a discussion could go in a classroom. I do not mean to suggest that such discussions always or must involve identity prejudices and silencing, only that they can and, when they do, they are a good example of the kind of partisan silencing that I am trying to identify here.
- 10 The claims, made in February of 2020, can be found in Egan, Lauren: Trump Calls Coronavirus Democrats’ ‘New Hoax’. In: *NBC News* <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-calls-coronavirus-democrats-new-hoax-n1145721> (28.2.2020)
- 11 Both the political or ethnic motivations of particular judges, such as Gonzalo Curiel (see Totenberg, Nina: Who is Judge Gonzalo Curiel, The Man Trump Attacked for His Mexican Ancestry?. In National Public Radio <https://www.npr.org/2016/06/07/481140881/who-is-judge-gonzalo-curiel-the-man-trump-attacked-for-his-mexican-ancestry> (7.6.2016) & Wolf, Z. Byron: Trump’s Attacks on Judge Curiel are Still Jarring to Read. In *CNN Politics* <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/27/politics/judge-curiel-trump-border-wall/index.html> (27.2.2018) and more generally of any judge or court that rules against him: In His Own Words: The President’s Attacks on the Courts. In *Brennan Center for Justice* <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/his-own-words-presidents-attacks-courts> (2.14.2020).
- 12 For a partial list of such charges, see Britzky, Haley: Everything Trump has Called “FAKE NEWS”. In *Axios* <https://www.axios.com/everything-trump-has-called-fake-news-1513303959-6603329e-46b5-44ea-b6be-70d0b3bdb0ca.html> 9.6.1017) and for analysis, see Sullivan, Margaret: What it Really Means When Trump Calls a Story ‘Fake News’. In: *The Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/what-it-really-means-when-trump-calls-a-story-fake-news/2020/04/13/56fbc2c0-7d8c-11ea-9040-68981f488eed_story.html (13.4.2020) & Sullivan, Margaret: The Term “Fake News” has Lost All Meaning. That’s Just how Trump Wants It. In: *The Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-term-fake-news-has-lost-all-meaning-thats-just-how-trump-wants-it/2018/04/03/ce102ed4-375c-11e8-8fd2-49fe3e675a89_story.html (4.4.2018) & Graves, Lucia: How Trump Weaponized ‘Fake News’ for His Own Political Ends. In: *Pacific Standard* <https://psmag.com/social-justice/how-trump-weaponized-fake-news-for-his-own-political-ends> (26.2.2018).

arguably all instances of partisan silencing. Responses of left-leaning and Democratic partisans to President Trump and his supporters also illustrate partisan silencing. The overtly polarizing nature of President Trump and of “Trumpism” has arguably led many on the political left to a position where no proposal, evidence, or argument associated with pro-Trump attitudes or positions can be viewed as sincere. A case in point is President Trump’s early advocacy of the malarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a potential treatment for COVID-19, which led to it becoming a sort of signpost for right-leaning partisan commitments during the spring and summer of 2020, while critique of it, at least in part due to partisan allergic reaction, became a signpost for left-leaning commitments during that same period. As a result of this reciprocally targeted partisan silencing, both advocacy for and critique of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19 based in normally accepted clinical and scientific sources came to be seen as insincere by already invested political partisans on all sides.¹⁴

2.4 Hyper-Partisan Political Silencing

While partisan silencing is arguably common, its scope tends to be limited, at least for individual citizens. An individual does not engage in partisan silencing of *everyone*, but of claims and reasoning offered by clear political opponents specifically, and typically on matters that in one way or another have become politically relevant or salient. What especially interests me here is what happens when the negative identity prejudice involved in partisan silencing transforms in such a way that it comes to apply to politically relevant discourse and assertions *as such*, rather than just to individuals and assertions that are clearly opposed to one’s own partisan commitments. I call this “hyper-partisan silencing”.

Hyper-Partisan silencing: a kind of testimonial epistemic injustice and sincerity silencing that occurs when an individual fails to get uptake or credibility when appealing to factual information, purportedly shared political principles and standards, or reasoned critique because of a *negative identity prejudice in the hearer(s) that attaches to politically relevant speakers and discourse participants as such*. This prejudice results in any speaker’s politically relevant discursive attempts being interpreted as insincere because motivated by commitment to partisan goals, despite their explicit content or reasoning.

¹³ E.g., Trump’s Secretary of Education, heiress Betsy DeVos, suggested in a 2017 speech addressed to college students at the Conservative Political Action Conference, “The fight against the education establishment extends to you too. The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think. They say that if you voted for Donald Trump, you’re a threat to the university community. But the real threat is silencing the First Amendment rights of people with whom you disagree.” Jaschik, Scott. DeVos vs. The Faculty. In: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/24/education-secretary-criticizes-professors-telling-students-what-think> (24.4.2017).

¹⁴ For a valuable write-up on the issue, see O’Connor, Cailin/Weatherall, James Owen: Hydroxychloroquine and the Political Polarization of Science. In: *The Boston Review* <https://bostonreview.net/science-nature-politics/cailin-oconnor-james-owen-weatherall-hydroxychloroquine-and-political> (4.5.2020).

An individual who has developed the attitude of hyper-partisan silencing interprets political speech *as such* as insincere. This does not mean that she ceases to have political commitments or to trust, advocate for, and agree with those who share her commitments. Rather, it means that the intellectual sincerity of political speech and reason-giving has, for her, dropped out of the equation significantly or altogether. At the very least, it is treated as significantly less important than forwarding her partisan agenda.

An illustration of this phenomenon is the public reaction to President Trump's then-Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, when he claimed that the crowd present at President Trump's January 2017 inauguration was the "largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period." (Ford 2017). This claim was demonstrably false on multiple fronts, the most glaring of which was a side-by-side comparison of aerial photography showing the inauguration crowds for President Barack Obama in 2009 and for President Trump in 2017.¹⁵ In a study based on the episode, Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks showed the unlabeled side-by-side photos to about 1400 U.S. Citizens who had self-identified as supporters of President Trump or of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (2018). When asked to identify which photograph had *more* people, about 15% of Trump supporters chose the photo (actually from Trump's inauguration) that clearly had a *smaller* crowd in it. While one interpretation of this phenomenon might be that the very strength of these supporters' convictions caused them to literally "see" the smaller crowd as larger, Schaffner and Luks hypothesize that these individuals are in fact engaged in "expressive responding", "...whereby individuals intentionally provide misinformation to survey researchers as a way of showing support for their political viewpoint" (2018, 136).¹⁶ On such a view, political partisans may still not really *believe* the misinformation to be accurate, but this does not stop them from speaking and acting *as though* it is in politically sensitive contexts. Individuals who engage in such expressive responding view not only the political speech of their opponents, but also their own as insincere. The factual and rational content of the speech is irrelevant except insofar as asserting it functions to publicly express support for some pre-existing partisan politician(s) and agenda.¹⁷ The generalization and normalization of this attitude is what I call hyper-partisan silencing.

Given the attitude of hyper-partisan silencing, it is not just explicit political partisans who are viewed as insincere, but politically relevant speakers as such. This is significant because "politically relevant speech" includes significant parts of the reporting of the press and media, the decisions of courts, and the knowledge (historical, scientific, ethical,

15 For the pictures, and a full breakdown of the dispute, see: Ford, Matt: Trump's Press Secretary Falsely Claims: 'Largest Audience Ever to Witness an Inauguration, Period'. In: The Atlantic <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/inauguration-crowd-size/514058/> (21.1.2017)

16 For some discussion and a slightly different take on the results, see (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019, 79 – 82).

17 In this connection it is noteworthy that there is no reason the Trump Administration had to double-down on the claim that the inauguration crowd size was large. After all, the smaller crowd size could have been offered as evidence that President Trump's supporters are largely working-class Americans left behind by the current political and economic order, and less able to hop a plane to Washington D. C. on short notice, unlike their elite latte-sipping liberal counterparts who bath in the unearned wealth of their globalist bubble and can afford, as a result, to jet-set at the spur of the moment. Assuming that Schaffner and Luks are right in their analysis, then *had* the Trump Administration taken this position, the same 15% of Trump supporters who identified the photo with the smaller crowd as containing more people would have given just the opposite answer, showing that it is partisan allegiance and not the factual content of utterances that determines their political speech.

interpretive, etc.) that issues from universities and research centers. Once speech from such institutions becomes politically relevant, the attitude of hyper-partisan silencing views it as insincere as well.¹⁸ At its worst, hyper-partisan silencing thus creates or is co-constitutive of conditions where the social and epistemic benefits of political discourse and the sense of a shared factual and historical world are undermined, while standards of shared public reason are ignored or openly violated, and the sense of a common political identity shared across partisan divisions and equally protected by the state, such as it is present to begin with, is placed under additional pressure or deteriorates.

It is likely that hyper-partisan silencing arises rather naturally out of partisan silencing. If partisan silencing has become widespread or typical in a political community and is engaged in with enough frequency by individuals of all partisan persuasions, then we have a situation where all sides view the political speech of other “sides” as insincere. From such a situation, it is but a small step to infer that political speakers *as such* are insincere. As with partisan silencing, so in the case of hyper-partisan silencing the attitude will not be particularly effective as silencing unless it is wielded (i) by large numbers of individuals or (ii) by individuals in positions that confer an authority or power that amplifies and enforces the hyper-partisan silencing they engage in. I call the situation that obtains when hyper-partisan silencing is, or is perceived to be, widespread or normal in the central political discourses of a political community *conditions of hyper-partisan silencing*. The more widespread and institutionally entrenched attitudes of hyper-partisan silencing become, the more incentive all citizens have to either engage insincerely with politics or not to engage at all. Thus, confronted with conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, both independent, engaged citizens and partisans who make an effort to engage in sincere political discourse are dissuaded from attempting to carry out this (already difficult) project, while lying, disinformation, and self-deception are tacitly encouraged. The deeply contentious confirmation hearings for U. S. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and the Impeachment Trial of President Trump are recent examples where hyper-partisan silencing was arguably both widespread and central to the public discussion.

3. Arendt on Truth and Lies in Politics

In what follows I marshal Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the role of truth and lies in politics in order to partially explain and analyze the phenomenon of hyper-partisan silencing and suggest possible strategies for resisting it. Arendt addresses the question of the relationship between truth and politics thematically in her 1967 essay “Truth and Politics”, and then again in 1971 in “Lying in Politics”.¹⁹ Arendt’s discussion self-

¹⁸ This is not to suggest that all speech that issues from universities, research centers, the judiciary, or especially the press is necessarily non-partisan and sincere. Indeed, research centers can be partisan, and some newspapers and media sources are overtly and unapologetically so. Still, at least under ideal conditions and perhaps controlling for special or exceptional cases, the role of such institutions in a liberal democracy is to function first and foremost as essentially non-partisan arbiters of factual information and truth claims, of the quality and cogency of discourse, and of the permissibility of certain actions and policies in light of commonly shared and applicable standards. The attitude of hyper-partisan silencing neutralizes this possibility from the outset.

consciously refrains from attempting to provide an account of what is meant by “truth” or by “the facts” (548).²⁰ She instead contents herself with two major distinctions.

First, she invokes the distinction between rational truths and factual truths, where rational truths are understood as including “mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truth”, and factual truths as including common historical, social, and natural facts such as “the role during the Russian Revolution of a man by the name of Trotsky” (548) or “[i]n August 1914 Germany invaded Belgium” (554).

Second, Arendt recognizes the distinction between facts and interpretations of those facts, and acknowledges the difficulty of talking about facts independent of an interpretative, theoretical, or pragmatic context that gives them meaning, relevance, and organization. Here too Arendt does not provide a theory of facts or of interpretation or of the complicated relationships between evidence and theory in science or history,²¹ but she insists that “we are concerned here with brutally elementary data...whose indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism” (554).²² This insistence also seems to explain Arendt’s often unqualified use of the terms ‘truth’ and ‘truth-telling’ (rather than speaking in terms of what the best evidence supports or of expert consensus on a given topic). Like Arendt, I will not try to resolve these issues here. I will follow her vocabulary for the most part, noting complexities as and where they seem relevant.

This being said, despite viewing truth and respect for shared factual truth as essential for sustainable politics,²³ Arendt provides an analysis that focuses primarily on the ways

19 These essays are continuous with issues already discussed in the later chapters of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, though provide a more focused discussion of the central issues.

20 “Wanting to find out what injury political power is capable of inflicting upon truth, we look into these matters for political rather than philosophical reasons, and hence can afford to disregard the question of what truth is, and be content to take the word in the sense in which men commonly understand it.” (548)

21 Though she does take something of a stand regarding history: “Even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history, we admit no more than that it has the right to rearrange the facts in accordance with its own perspective; we don’t admit the right to touch the factual matter itself.” (554)

22 I think it is fair to grant Arendt this point, while also noting that since many of her comments about lying, truth-telling, and self-deception are intended to focus first and foremost on factual truth, the question of the borderline between factual truth and interpretation, and so ultimately between factual truth and rational truth, will make some difference. In the context of political discourse, especially political denial, it is possible to speak of lying about or denying the facts when someone asserts that a specific historical event did not occur or that the number of people who have died from an infectious disease is not what it is or that the number of crimes committed by immigrants is higher than it is, but it is also possible to speak of lying about or denying the facts when a politician denies widely held scientific consensus about the mechanisms by which a given natural phenomenon work, and so about the likelihood of future events occurring, such as the spread of an infectious disease or the likely effects of anthropogenic climate change.

23 There is no doubt that Arendt views truth of all varieties as essential for political community. She points out that whereas a political community might get away with ignoring things such as justice or freedom for some time, a community that systematically ignores truth ultimately jeopardizes its own survival (552-3). Further, and more specifically political, Arendt points out that “[f]acts inform opinions, and opinions inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth” (554). Truth, or the facts in this case, thus have a significant role to play in informing and constraining political opinions and interpretations, and in functioning as a sort of common basis around which and in terms of which disagreements might be understood. The very idea of freedom of opinion and of a plurality of viewpoints would hardly make sense if it were not understood on all sides that there is something those opinions are *about*, some common shared past and present reality, and field of action concerning which judgments about what is significant or best to do might differ. Related to this, Arendt also recognizes the political significance and need for...certain public institutions, established and supported by the powers that be, in which, contrary to all political rules, truth and truthfulness have always constituted the highest

in which the realms of the political and of truth-seeking and truth-telling are antagonistic, and of the reasons why politics and political action by their very nature come into conflict with the truth. In short, for Arendt, the difficulties of truth-telling and the successes of lying in politics are closely related to basic features of human action itself. Political action is about “changing the world”, an activity connected with human imagination and freedom, so the temptation to overlook or deny inconvenient facts or to provide oneself and one’s supporters with a larger than life “image” of the world as one would like it to be (though unfortunately is not) is an ever-present feature of political action. I take partisan and hyper-partisan silencing to be the reverse-image, as it were, of this fact about political action. If the temptation to deception is built into the structure of political action, then it will take but little to convince individuals of a particular partisan persuasion that their opponents have given in to this temptation. The same reasons that make lying in politics tempting make seeing political partisans as insincere, especially those who disagree with one, much easier as well. Arendt’s analysis thus helps us to see why some partisan silencing is normal and to be expected in politics, and so offers some insight into how to understand the more extreme situations under which partisan silencing has become widespread or has given way to hyper-partisan silencing.

4. A Partial Arendtian Explanation of Hyper-Partisan Silencing

A central feature of conditions of hyper-partisan silencing is that their own internal logic seems to preclude meaningfully addressing them. If basic features of what should be shared political reality are being systematically denied or distorted for the sake of political advantage, it should be possible to cancel the pursuit of political advantage by these means simply by publicly asserting the relevant facts, or publicly indicating and explaining the relevant violations of ethical or political principles. Yet the silencing impact of hyper-partisan silencing conditions seems to preclude this. If political speech as such is viewed as insincere and a mere vehicle for naked partisan commitments on all sides, then political speech decrying this state of affairs—even in the most fact-based and neutral terms—is itself going to be viewed as insincere and a mere vehicle for naked partisan commitments as well. Under conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, the political speaker who attempts to call attention to the dangers of a political community engulfed in hyper-partisan silencing is, like the actor on the stage trying to warn the audience of a *real* fire, unable to communicate *this* danger because the tacit rules of political discourse now make doing so nearly impossible.

The balance of Arendt’s discussion of truth and lying in politics does more to explain and substantiate the possibilities of partisan and hyper-partisan silencing than it does to alleviate them or provide guidance on how to overcome them. This explanation and substantiation are valuable in their own right, however, and the following sub-sections

critterion of speech and endeavor. (571)

These institutions include for Arendt the judiciary, the academy and universities, and the press and they are intended to be essentially non-partisan institutions committed to the pursuit and articulation of truths of all kinds. She also believes that, at the end of the day, no amount of political lying and self-deception will actually be sufficient to overcome the ruth and supplant it with a politically fabricated reality. So, in addition to being politically valuable, there is also no genuine alternative to respecting the truth.

articulate them at some length. Arendt recognizes a fundamental distinction between politics and truth-seeking as different “existential modes” as well as some particular tensions between political agency on the one hand, and the nature of truth, especially factual truth, on the other. This section will address these distinctions (3.1) and this tension (3.2), and this in turn will help to further illuminate why politics in general, and conditions of hyper-partisan silencing in particular, present so many obstacles to truth-telling.

4.1 “The Political” and the “Truth-Seeking” as Distinct Existential Modes

Throughout her discussion, Arendt presses a rather strict distinction between the *philosophical mode* and the *political mode*. The same proposition, the same content, such as “all men are equal” can be common to both. However, a “mode” as Arendt understands this consists of an attitude, a dominant set of goals, discursive and evidential standards, and a relationship to others.

According to Arendt, the philosophical mode is aimed at self-evident or rationally demonstrated truth obtained, in the first instance, by the individual in solitude working disinterestedly toward this goal; its standards are the standards of rational argumentation and insight, and its propositions are claimed to be true independently of the particular attitudes, positions, or consent of individuals.

The political mode, by contrast, is the mode aimed at achieving common political life and action together. Its propositions require the consent of those who participate in the political community, and ideally involve abstraction from the personal private interests of political actors, but they remain partisan in that they are intended to achieve particular individual and collective goods. The standards relevant here are intersubjective persuasion and consent. *Qua* political principle, a proposition’s efficacy depends, in part, on its acceptance by others.²⁴

4.1.1 Obstacles to Asserting Philosophical Principles in the Political Realm

The main obstacle to bringing philosophical truth to bear on the political realm, in switching from one “mode” to the other, is that in being so applied philosophical truth undergoes a conversion from *episteme*, rationally intuited or demonstrated truth, to *doxa*, to mere opinion or to being one opinion or view amongst others and thus required to compete with others for acceptance in the political realm. The terms on which it must compete then become those proper to political persuasion. Thus, while the same proposition may operate in both the philosophical and the political realm, the way in which the proposition is interpreted and the reason for its acceptance in the two cases differ. For example, Arendt considers Thomas Jefferson’s invocation of the idea that *all men are created equal* in the Declaration of Independence. She briefly rehearses some

²⁴As Arendt says, “Their validity depends upon free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion” (560-61).

“philosophical arguments” for the proposition (p. 560), however, she views all such arguments as distinct from what happens in the political realm, where,

“That all men are created equal is not self-evident nor can it be proved. We hold this opinion because freedom is possible only among equals, and we believe that the joys and gratifications of free company are to be preferred to the doubtful pleasures of holding dominion.” (560)

I think Arendt’s insistence here might be a little too absolute. I see no reason, in principle, why some genuinely philosophical argument might not get at least some traction in the political realm. Nevertheless, her central point seems right, that the widespread uptake and success of a philosophical principle or view in the realm of the political will depend on the ways in which that view appeals to pre-existing interests and goals of at least many political actors, or can be seen as an advantageous common framework or basis for conducting political life together going forward.²⁵ If this is correct, then conditions of hyper-partisan silencing are among the worst for attempting to establish consensus on political principles, or to appeal to nominally shared principles in order to criticize particular politicians, policies, or discursive strategies. The logic of such conditions requires interpreting a speaker’s invocation or advocacy of any such principles as an insincere performance intended to further, in one way or another, merely partisan goals. Yet such an interpretation runs directly contrary to what, at least according to Arendt, is necessary for such principles to be widely accepted, namely an expectation that they might serve common political interests across or despite specific partisan affiliations.

4.1.2 Obstacles to Factual Truth-Telling in the Political Realm

Concerning factual truth, Arendt points out the advantages of the political liar or misinformer in dealing with facts. Arendt’s discussion here is so thorough that, by the end, it is hard to believe that there is much political advantage at all to be gained by truth-telling. This, in turn, lends some support to the attitudes of partisan and hyper-partisan silencing. The advantages of the liar in dealing with facts in the political realm, according to Arendt, include the following:

First, lying, unlike truth-telling, is a type of political action. Arendt maintains (see 3.2 below) that mere facts are politically inert if considered apart from an interpretation of them, and from particular normative commitments and political goals. Taken *by themselves*, they determine no course of action, so merely asserting the facts is not yet

²⁵ These latter are important, and may even be noble, but they are considerations strictly distinct from the philosophical justifications typically given for political principles. It may well be that the view of government outlined in Locke’s *Second Treatise* can be seen, after deliberation, to be a more desirable and advantageous one for organizing and sustaining a particular political community than, say, absolute monarchy. However, his most central philosophical justification for the view arises from a view of its fundamental principles as being dictated by natural law and human nature. Philosophically, it would follow that the view ought to be accepted regardless of its consequences or utility, yet politically this line of reasoning alone is unlikely to be effective.

acting politically in her sense.²⁶ By contrast, the calculated lie or misinformation is political action of the first order. The political liar lies *specifically* in order to achieve some end that the facts might otherwise stand in the way of. A politician who opposes stricter laws requiring voter identification may exaggerate or lie about the number of citizens that such laws would disenfranchise.²⁷ A politician whose goal is to significantly restrict immigration may exaggerate or lie about immigrant crime, the impact of immigrants on the economy, or the state of illegal immigration at the nation's borders. While it is conceivable that someone might at least attempt to tell the truth for its own sake, the lie in politics is born in the service of particular agendas and courses of action—respect for the truth itself is not. Any claim about the facts that a political actor makes is either done for its own sake, so pointless, or done as part of a political project or agenda, so at least potentially suspicious.

That lying is itself a kind of motivated political action gives it a second advantage over truth-telling, which is that the liar is able to tailor his lies to the expectations and desires of his audience.²⁸ For United States Citizens on the right and left, the hypothesis, popular in spring of 2020, that COVID-19 was developed in a Chinese laboratory and then escaped leading to a global pandemic, was quite palatable. It fit with pre-existing cultural and political attitudes about China, and as such struck many as more logical than the relatively random and arbitrary actual explanation of the virus' origin that most health experts accept.²⁹ In a similar vein, the discredited claims of the U.S. actor Jussie Smollett to have been attacked due to his race and sexual orientation in Chicago in January of 2019 fit a general (and factually true) narrative that hate-crimes have been on the increase in the United States since 2016.³⁰ In short, political lying and misinformation can be and

²⁶This point calls attention to and undermines a rhetorical strategy more typical on the left than on the right whose basic structure is to insist upon having “listened” to the facts or the science and thereby arrived directly at one's particular policy proposal or course of political action. A typical style of reasoning offered to justify lock-downs and other politically controversial measures in the face of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, and of course in relation to anthropogenic climate change At its most basic this amounts to the distinction between factual and normative judgments in ethics (Veatch 2008, ch.4). For discussion of the complexities of the “listen to the science” argument concerning political policy, see Goldenberg (2019).

²⁷The charge of exaggeration, at least, applies to Hillary Clinton in at least one instance on this front. For the original claim, see: Claim User Clip: Clinton on Georgia Voter Registration. In: C-SPAN <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4784955/user-clip-clinton-georgia-voter-registration> (3.3.2019); and for a fact check, see: Kiely, Eugene: FactChecking Clinton's Voter Suppression Claim's. In *FactCheck.Org* <https://www.factcheck.org/2019/03/factchecking-clintons-voter-suppression-claims/> (7.3.2019).

²⁸As Arendt points out, “Since the liar is free to fashion his “facts” to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness – one of the outstanding characteristics of all events– has mercifully disappeared.” (565)

²⁹Timeline of the claims Brewster, Jack: A Timeline of the COVID-19 Wuhan Lab Origin Theory. In: *Forbes* <https://forbes.mc/article/a-timeline-of-the-covid-19-wuhan-lab-origin-theory> (11.5.2020); History of the claim Cohen, John: Trump ‘Owes us an Apology’. Chinese Scientist at the Center of COVID-19 Origin Theories Speaks Out. In: *Science* <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/07/trump-owes-us-apology-chinese-scientist-center-covid-19-origin-theories-speaks-out> (24.7.2020); Current Science on the issue (Morens et al. 2020) <http://www.ajtmh.org/content/journals/10.4269/ajtmh.20-0849.jsessionid=K3EmYmBTHnemgdqJDD8QEHL.ip-10-241-1-122>; and the theory might be correct after all Latham, Jonathan/Wilson, Allison: The Case is Building that COVID-19 Had a Lab Origin. In: Independent Science News <https://www.independentsciencenews.org/health/the-case-is-building-that-covid-19-had-a-lab-origin/> (2.6.2020).

³⁰BBC: Jussie Smollett” Timeline of the Actor's Alleged Attack and Arrest. In: *BBC News* <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-47317701> (25.6.2019); Hate Crime Increase, Hassan, Adeel: Hate-

typically are tailored to the narrative that both the speaker and their audience, or at least some relevant sub-set of it, are ready to accept. The teller of truth has no such advantage but must make do with the facts even if they are unexpected, unusual, or undesirable for her hearers.

In light of the foregoing, a third and closely related obstacle to factual truth-telling in politics is that the “teller of factual truth”, at least the professional one such as the investigator or the reporter or the scientist, faces a sort of double-bind:

“If the teller of factual truth wants to play a political role, and therefore to be persuasive, he will, more often than not, go to considerable lengths to explain why his particular truth serves the best interest of some group....the teller of factual truth, when he enters the political realm and identifies himself with some partial interest and power formation, compromises on the only quality that could have made his truth appear plausible, namely, his personal truthfulness, guaranteed by impartiality, integrity, independence.” (563)

In other words, the political inertness of mere facts means that getting them to have a role in politics requires inserting them into some interpretive and normative framework that demonstrates their political relevance, but doing so will align them with some actual or at least perceived partisan political interests, and so undermine the credibility that would usually attend the “pure” or apolitical teller of truth. This helps to explain not only the power of lying and misinformation in politics, but also how plausible an initial basis attitudes of partisan and hyper-partisan silencing actually have. To provide another example, it is known that pregnancy mortality rates have been steadily increasing in the United States, especially among African American women. It would be odd for researchers to carry out a study, arrive at this data, and *not* believe it was politically important. However, while no party has outright denied this factual data, responding to it fits most conveniently with pre-existing commitments to safety-net programs and redistributive justice on the left than with long-term societal and free-market approaches typical of the right. Thus, tellers of this factual truth who want it to have uptake in politics are more likely to frame its solution in terms favorable to the left than to the right, thus opening themselves up to partisan suspicion and political attack.³¹

Fourth, and finally, the teller of factual truth cannot even, at least under normal circumstances, sacrifice herself in a meaningful way for the sake of *demonstrating the facts*. Someone who faces severe consequences or even death for insisting on the truth of what they believe is often viewed as *admirable*, as in the cases of Martin Luther or

Crime Violence Hits 16-Year High, F.B.I. Reports. In: New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/hate-crimes-fbi-report.html> (12.11.2019).

³¹ The CDC Data, CDC: Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System. In: CDC Website <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternal-mortality/pregnancy-mortality-surveillance-system.htm> (4.2.2020); Vox Reporting on the Issue, Belluz, Julia: We Finally Have a New US Maternal Mortality Estimate. It's Still Terrible. In: Vox <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/30/21113782/pregnancy-deaths-us-maternal-mortality-rate-30.1.2020>; for the Political context see Zhou, Li/North, Anna: How 2020 Democrats Would Tackle the Problem of Startlingly High Rates of Maternal Deaths in the US. In: Vox <https://www.vox.com/2019/6/26/18691611/2020-democrats-maternal-mortality-medicare> (26.6.2019) & Rayasam, Renuka/Ehley, Brianna: Efforts to Save New Moms Clash with GOP's Medicaid Cuts. In *Politico* <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/14/new-moms-clash-gop-medicare-cuts-1364564> (14.6.2019).

Giordano Bruno, or at least as *loyal* or committed, as in the case of U. S. political operative for the Trump Campaign, Roger Stone (who risked serious jail time for lying to protect the current U.S. president's campaign³²), but what their acts of defiance demonstrate or persuade people of is *not* the truth of their *factual* claims or views (concerning, e.g. the correct understanding of communion, or the existence of an infinity of worlds, or that the President did nothing wrong), but rather their integrity, their courage, their commitment, their loyalty, or their unblinking partisanship.³³

In short, according to Arendt the political advantages of lying are numerous while the nature of politics makes such lying relatively easy and often beneficial. By contrast, advocacy of the facts for its own sake confronts numerous obstacles while conjoining such advocacy with political interests undermines the credibility of the advocacy itself, and even risking adverse personal consequences *for the sake of the facts* is more likely to publicly demonstrate the sincerity of one's commitment to one's normative or political project than it is the factual truth one asserts.

4.2 Tension Between Political Agency and Truth, Particularly Factual Truth

In addition to the foregoing, Arendt identifies a number of ways in which truth, and factual truth in particular, come into conflict with political activity and goals, and so are not likely to be the primary concern of political actors. First, on Arendt's view, it is of the very nature of human political agency to seek to change the world, including of course some of its politically central facts. The political agent *qua* political agent is not interested in the world primarily as it is, but as she and her co-agents believe that it can and should be.

Second, there is a kind of despotism in truths of all kinds (both rational and factual) that stands over against, makes demands on, and presents limits to the realm of the political. Truth cannot be negotiated with, debated, or dominated. Insofar as it is truth, it must be acknowledged, yet neither the despot nor the lover of democratic politics can be entirely happy with this, as in both cases truth sets limits to the workings of their preferred political organization and activities.

Third, (and returning to factual truth), facts themselves are deeply contingent. They are a certain way, but could easily have been otherwise and can easily be imagined otherwise. They can thus appear to be an arbitrary and surmountable obstacle to the achievement of urgently desired political goals.

Fourth, the appearance of facts in politics is typically not *direct*, but is mediated by documents or testimony, or decided upon by a majority of experts or a scientific institution or government data-collection office. In such cases, the brute contingency of facts is filtered through the frail and often biased and partisan lenses of human

³²Frum, David: Stone Walks Free in One of the Greatest Scandals in American History. In: *The Atlantic* <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/roger-stone/614068/> (11.6.2020)

³³As Arendt puts it, "[a] teller of factual truth, in the unlikely event that he wished to stake his life on a particular fact, would achieve a kind of miscarriage. What would become manifest in his act would be his courage or, perhaps, his stubbornness but neither the truth of what he had to say nor even his own truthfulness. For why shouldn't a liar stick to his lies with great courage, especially in politics, where he might be motivated by patriotism or some other kind of legitimate group partiality?" (p. 562)

perception and reporting, adding an additional reason for the political agent who finds them unwelcome to view them as suspicious, and so likely surmountable. The indirect way in which we access politically important facts is well-illustrated by democratic elections. In an election, there are brute facts about how many votes have been cast for each candidate and so about who won the election. However, such facts cannot be communicated to a whole nation “directly”. Rather, they are filtered through a complex system of ballot casting, collecting, securing, counting, auditing, reporting, and certifying. This is not just how it *is* done, but how it *must* be done practically speaking, at least in nations with hundreds of thousands or even millions of citizens. As such, the facts of an election can be challenged simply by calling into question the integrity of any part of the process by which the facts are collected, tabulated, and reported.

Fifth, and as noted above, Arendt points out that while facts may indeed stand in the way of a particular agenda, they themselves *determine no agenda*.³⁴ Facts are “politically inert”. Their significance and the action that they might warrant depends upon conceptual and normative commitments that are strictly speaking separate from them. Thus, the invocation of facts in actual political contexts is itself almost always partisan insofar as it will occur in the context of advocating or resisting some course of political action. In politics, the speaker of factual truth almost always does have a specific political agenda that the facts are meant to support or help justify.

For all the foregoing reasons there is thus a constant invitation for the political actor to deceive others or even herself about the facts—since her ultimate goal in any case is to bring it about that some of them be different than they are—and (especially relevant to my concern here) to view political opponents who invoke facts as doing so out of partisan commitments, either as a challenge to her own preferred course of action or in support of their own.³⁵ At least according to Arendt, lying, self-deception, and dismissal on grounds of partisan affiliation are not aberrations but ever-present possibilities for political actors that are built into the structure of political action and the nature of facts themselves.³⁶

³⁴ Even to stand in the way of a given course of political action, a fact or set of facts arguably needs to be augmented with interpretive and normative commitments, or to directly contradict claims made by advocates of that course of action. Original fatality estimates for the unmitigated spread of COVID-19 in the United States ranged from about 350,000 to as many as 2.2 million deaths. This fact is only an impediment to political actors who wished to do little to confront the disease in order to sustain economic strength or growth (a normative or political commitment) under two conditions. First, if they also view it as a normative commitment or political goal to prevent the deaths of significant numbers of their citizens. In such a case, achieving the first goal means, given the foregoing facts, sacrificing the second and the facts force some adjustment. Second, such political actors may have explicitly claimed or suggested that the virus was not a significant threat. While what counts as a ‘significant threat’ is part of the determination here, on the face of it the mortality estimate of 350,000 to 2.2 million potential deaths for unmitigated spread contradicts this essentially factual claim and calls for adjustment of course.

³⁵ It is natural to imagine, though Arendt does not discuss it in this context, that the same impulse might push partisans to subtly shift the meanings of key political terms related to facts, such as “stolen election”, “threat”, “invasion”, “emergency”, or “majority” in order to achieve apparent rhetorical victories in support of their partisan goals by shifting the linguistic lens through which facts are seen and interpreted.

³⁶ An environment of hyper-partisan silencing, as I have defined it, is accounted for but also goes beyond the foregoing insofar as it ignores or silences appeals not just to facts, but to fundamental political and normative principles, and to basic principles of reasoning and criticism as well on grounds that such appeals and such criticisms are, in fact, merely partisan rhetoric without legitimacy. It is probably rare that the fundamental political and normative principles are outright rejected, or that basic violations of critical reasoning are endorsed, so much as that the appearance of respecting these things despite actions to the contrary is sustained largely via the mechanism of invalidating critics’ invocation of this evidence on grounds of their

Thus, just as lying is an ever-present possibility in political action due to its very nature, so the development of attitudes of partisan and hyper-partisan silencing are as well. Political actors naturally warrant some suspicion when it comes to the facts they do and do not respect, it is thus not difficult to imagine how such suspicion might become overblown or dogmatic, or be invoked and encouraged as part of some politician or party's primary rhetorical strategy, and so result in the phenomena of partisan and hyper-partisan silencing that are my concern here.

5. Arendtian Proposals for Resisting Hyper-Partisan Silencing

In her discussion of truth and politics, Arendt makes two suggestive comments that raise the possibility of meaningfully resisting what I call hyper-partisan silencing. In what follows, I attempt to articulate each of these potential strategies in turn. The first strategy involves a political agent who advocates some political principle or principles “demonstrating” the non-partisan validity of the relevant principles by engaging in political action that simultaneously instantiates and so exemplifies the relevant principle(s) while at the same time exposing the actor to significant loss to clearly personal or partisan commitments. By defying the discursive logic of conditions of hyper-partisan silencing such an action has the potential to break its silencing effect and so make some contribution to reorientating political discourse. The second strategy involves telling factual truths that are particularly inconvenient (and so the objects of outright lies, convenient silence, or self-deception) for all or for the vast majority of partisans in a given political context. Such truth-telling may take the form of simple advocacy, or perhaps more likely a kind of investigative journalism, whistleblowing, or sharing of nominally classified or secret information. A truth-teller whose truth cannot be easily reconciled with *any* of the clear partisan interests dominant in a particular context cannot be easily dismissed as itself a partisan subterfuge and so stands a chance of at least disrupting a status quo of hyper-partisan silencing.

I take myself to be elaborating on suggestions made by Arendt, and to be doing so within the framework that she herself laid out for understanding lying and truth in politics, but also attempting to take these ideas a few steps further. Like Arendt, my pessimism remains intact. I do not intend to make the claim that either of these strategies *will* be successful in undermining conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, or even that they are particularly likely to be. However, I think that both represent strategies that, in defying the typical logic underlying conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, will be *more*

personal or partisan interests. I will not attempt to analyze the precise conditions that make these further steps possible here. It is not difficult to imagine, however, that the same strong motivations at work in partisan political agency generally would, if unchecked by other moral and political commitments, naturally lead an individual and party to seek to define, determine, and control political discourse and reality entirely on their own terms, factual and rational truths equally included, and I will presuppose this insight in what follows. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt considers this process for the case of fascism, which she analyzes as the complete takeover of all state offices and positions by the personnel and interests of a single party, and at length for totalitarianism, which is the organized annihilation of traditional politics and the state as such in the pursuit of realizing perpetual movement toward an all-encompassing ideological project. Neither fascism nor totalitarianism limited themselves to the denial or modification of factual reality, and both, at least in their early stages, sought to eliminate their accountability to a space of shared political principles and reality by portraying critiques formed in the terms of such a space as mere partisan outbursts.

persuasive under such conditions than will be the mere assertion of either factual truths or political principles as such. I believe that this alone makes them strategies of significant interest.

5.1 Exemplarity in Action as Means of Persuasion for Ethical Principles

Despite the gloomy assessment laid out in section 4 above, Arendt also maintains that it is possible for the philosopher, and so for a political actor in general, to persuade others in a political context of the truth of a philosophical proposition, specifically a normative one, by *exemplifying* it in their life and actions. Her central case is Socrates, and the principle she considers is the fundamental Socratic ethical commitment that *it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong*. Arendt suggests that despite being unconvincing in ordinary political persuasion or argument, Socrates' principle has gained widespread acceptance, and that "...this has been due to a rather unusual kind of persuasion" (561), namely,

Socrates decided to stake his life on this truth – to set an example, not when he appeared before the Athenian tribunal but when he refused to escape the death sentence. And this teaching by example is, indeed, the only form of "persuasion" that philosophical truth is capable of without perversion or distortion...(p. 561)

In other words, Arendt here suggests that the resistance of the political realm to philosophical argumentation, and the "perversion" that philosophical principles undergo when they enter the political realm can be overcome if the advocate of a particular principle takes political action under circumstances where his principle is clearly *instantiated* by his action, and his reasons for acting are most plausibly construed as dedication to the principle itself. Socrates said repeatedly throughout his life that *it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong*, explained how escaping from prison to avoid his sentence would be doing wrong (most centrally in the dialog *Crito*), and then proceeded to suffer wrong as a consequence of refraining from committing it. Under such conditions, Arendt says, "...philosophical truth can become "practical" and inspire action without violating the rules of the political realm..." (p. 561).

The idea that moral exemplification can play a central role in teaching about and inspiring good character and right conduct has a long history in philosophical thinking going back at least to Aristotle. It is prominent in discussions of virtue ethics generally, and has recently received elaboration and defense by Linda Zagzebski (2017). A moral exemplar is a person whose character, life, and actions embody morally praiseworthy qualities, and who thereby typically inspires a sense of moral admiration, inspiration, and a desire to emulate them in others. In a brief explanation of the persuasive power of exemplars, Arendt explains their efficacy by appeal to the idea, which she ascribes to Kant, that practical concepts require intuitions in experience—the cognition of examples—in order to validate them (Arendt 1967/2000, p. 561 – 62). On this view, a normative

principle that seems plausible but perhaps not compelling receives justification or validation in experience when it is clearly instantiated in an example.³⁷

The concept of moral exemplification has also been discussed in recent moral psychology in relation to the phenomenon of “moral elevation” (Haidt 2001)—a moral emotion characterized as a positive physiological and cognitive response to the experience of someone else, a moral exemplar, engaging in morally praiseworthy or virtuous behavior—and this discussion provides some further support for Arendt’s idea that exemplification of a moral principle in action might be particularly persuasive or motivating. In a review of work on moral elevation, Pohling and Diessner (2016) make the case that existing literature strongly suggests that moral elevation *broadens* subjects’ moral horizons, making them more sensitive to morally salient features of their relationships to others and more aware of ways they might act morally, and provides at least some support that repeated experiences of moral elevation help to build emotional and intellectual resources over time. In short, people who regularly experience and reflect on moral elevation may actually become better at identifying moral issues and responding to them over time.

Returning to Arendt’s central case of Socrates, I want to develop the features of the case that make it particularly compelling as an instance of political persuasion by exemplification, and consider the possibility of extending this to a more general strategy for affirming core normative and political principles in the face of widespread lying and conditions of hyper-partisan silencing.

Arendt suggests that Socrates exemplified the principle that *it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong* specifically when he accepted his sentence at the hands of the Athenian court rather than escaping from prison (as is generally accepted he could have done). How did this exemplification come about? I think a couple of features of the case are central. First, Socrates had always taught and maintained the truth of this principle. Second, he found himself in personal political circumstances where, by his own interpretation and by the interpretation of many around him, it was relatively clear that the principle applied or at least should for anyone who believed it. Given the situation he found himself in, he and his principle were being tested. Third, the situation he found himself in set up a clear divergence between his commitment to the principle on the one hand, and his personal (and perhaps also partisan political) interests on the other, assuming these to be not being put to death and not giving his political opponents and personal enemies the satisfaction of putting him to death. Fourth and finally, not only did his action (remaining in prison to face his sentence) clearly instantiate the relevant principle, but it did so in a way sufficiently public to be widely known and recognized.³⁸

³⁷ This raises the question of how we can be confident that the moral principles whose instantiation in experience we find compelling and admirable are themselves correct? Arendt does not go into this question, and I will not either here, other than to mention that in her writing on this issue, Zagzebski does take it up. She argues by analogy with reasons for epistemic trust in our cognitive faculties and beliefs based on them generally, suggesting that the moral emotion of admiration in response to an exemplar is likely to be trustworthy, so long as it is subjected to some additional types of reflection (comparing it with other instances that we find exemplary, reflecting on disagreements concerning what is exemplary when these arise, etc.) (Zagzebski 2017, 44-50).

³⁸ Arendt does not go into more detail about how precisely such examples “persuade”. However, that the issue here is what Arendt calls one of “philosophical principle”, and that Socrates’ action can plausibly be construed as instantiating the very principle he advocated appears to be what is central, for Arendt, in giving it its

Arendt concludes her discussion of Socrates' persuasion by moral exemplification in action with the following remarks,

“This transformation of a theoretical or speculative statement into exemplary truth – a transformation of which only moral philosophy is capable – is a borderline experience for the philosopher: by setting an example and “persuading” the multitude in the only way open to him, he has begun to act. Today, when hardly any philosophical statement, no matter how daring, will be taken seriously enough to endanger the philosopher’s life, even this rare chance of having a philosophical truth politically validated has disappeared.” (p. 562)

Here I think Arendt oversimplifies on two counts. First, I see no reason why the class of people who can demonstrate by exemplifying should be limited to philosophers. Politicians and citizens too can invoke and defend abstract and philosophical principles such as “all men are created equal”, “morally similar cases should be treated similarly by the law”, or “oppression deforms the human spirit”. Should they find themselves under conditions where defending and acting upon such principles places them at serious risk, it seems clear that they too might demonstrate or persuade by exemplifying the principle. Second, even if commitment to an abstract principle does not endanger the philosopher or politician’s life *per se*, it is not clear why abiding by it may not place them at serious personal risk, or amount to suspending or even going against their own partisan commitments. If these two adjustments are accepted, then *persuasion by exemplification in action* presents itself as a meaningful strategy of political argumentation, one that may well be effective under conditions of widespread political lying, and perhaps especially under conditions of hyper-partisan silencing. Viewed this way, the role of French statesman Georges Clemenceau and novelist Emile Zola in Arendt’s telling of the Dreyfus Affair in chapter 4 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is arguably a case study in demonstration of principle by political exemplification.

persuasive power. At the end of section 3.2, I mentioned the (admittedly diverse amongst themselves) examples of Martin Luther, Giordano Bruno, and the living political operative Roger Stone as examples of individuals who faced danger for what they believed, but whose sacrifices were not for all that effective in establishing the truth of what they believed on Arendt’s view. In that context I, following Arendt, had primarily factual truths in mind. Thus, Roger Stone faced prison time for lying to protect President Trump and his campaign, but this example did not give anyone reason to think his account of what had happened was factually true. Giordano Bruno faced death at the hands of the Inquisition, but this did not exemplify or otherwise prove the truth of his belief in an “infinity of worlds”. Luther confronted excommunication and possibly worse from the Catholic Church for his refusal to recant, but this did not exemplify or help show the truth of the majority of his particular theological commitments, e.g. concerning the relationship between works and grace in salvation, or how to interpret communion. It is a more complicated question whether any of these individuals, in facing danger or death, actively instantiated some specific “philosophical” or moral principle that they themselves advocated. While I see no reason to think this in the case of Roger Stone, a case might be made that Giordano Bruno’s death at the hands of the Inquisition can be said to exemplify his position that the intellect should pursue truths untrammelled by religion. Similarly, perhaps Luther’s refusal to recant instantiated in some way (rather than merely being caused by) his belief that the conscience of the individual believer rather than the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is best situated to interpret the meaning of scripture. If so, then while these individuals failed to achieve factual persuasion by confronting danger and death, they may well have achieved “exemplarity” on the level of “philosophical principles” and so persuaded in this sense. I see no reason to rule out this interpretation as consistent with Arendt’s account.

Beginning in 1894, the Dreyfus Affair involved the trial and conviction of French army captain Alfred Dreyfus for espionage, along with subsequent upheaval, challenges, retrials and eventual exoneration in 1906. Dreyfus was Jewish, the evidence against him was fabricated, and the original trials essentially formalities in a project of removing him from his post. As a Jew and a convicted traitor, Dreyfus attracted the ire of the military, the clergy, and large sections of the political class and public at large, even though careful attention to the proceedings made it rather clear even from the outside that this was a miscarriage of justice (which, in fact, it was). Emile Zola said as much in his now famous editorial, *J'Accuse* (1898), and found support in the statesman and journalist Georges Clemenceau, and in a comparatively small group of supporters who came to be known as the Dreyfusards. Arendt's main point in recounting the affair in *Origins* is to illustrate how entrenched nationalism and antisemitism can work together to organize popular mob support and violence at the margins of state authority and control. The story is also, however, one of political decay. The central players in Third Republic politics were self-serving partisans through and through, whether the clergy, the military, the majority of politicians, or the working classes and the populace at large. Those who framed and prosecuted Dreyfus did so for partisan reasons, and those who stood by and let it happen did so because they had no partisan reasons to oppose it, at least at the beginning. As Arendt characterizes the situation, "[n]o party...was ready to make an issue of justice per se...to stand, come what may, for justice, the sole unbreakable bond of union between civilized men." (p. 112). Rather,

...they were concerned primarily and essentially with the interests of their class. They were not troubled by any higher obligation toward human solidarity and had no conception of what communal life really meant...law and honor are mere words. (112)

Arendt's description of the breakdown of politics and parties in *fin de siècle* Third Republic France is at least reminiscent of the conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, and might well strike contemporary readers as a not completely inaccurate depiction of much of partisan politics and polarization in our own period. In any case, what is crucial is that into this mix of partisan self-interest and lies stepped Zola, Clemenceau, and the Dreyfusards. Their defense of Dreyfus aligned with none of the dominant partisan interests of the time and therefore exposed them to significant personal and political danger. Yet, precisely in this the Dreyfusards, Clemenceau and Zola in particular, seem to rise above petty partisan interests and achieve a kind of demonstration by exemplarity of certain fundamental normative principles. In Arendt's own words,

The greatness of Clemenceau's approach lies in the fact that it was not directed at a particular miscarriage of justice, but was based upon such "abstract" ideas as justice, liberty, and civic virtue. (110)

Acting on the basis of such fundamental principles, and in the absence of clear personal and political incentives of the typical partisan sort for doing so, Clemenceau and

the Dreyfusards seem to be a case in point of the kind of demonstration by exemplification that Arendt discusses in the case of Socrates. This is not to say, of course, that they immediately or ever “convinced everyone” or even most people, or that they were able to stave off or undo the array of political problems and decay that French politics of the time suffered from. It is to say, however, that their enacting the principles of justice, liberty, and civic virtue in their very defense of them makes what they did *more persuasive*, at least insofar as it is not easily subject to dismissal in terms of merely personal or partisan motives. Even under conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, we should expect such gestures to have more persuasive power than others precisely because they disrupt and go against the discursive patterns and expectations set up by hyper-partisan silencing itself.

In short, Arendt’s suggestion that it is possible to engage in political persuasion concerning a philosophical principle by exemplifying it seems clearly to admit of extension to advocacy of fundamental normative and political principles generally. It is precisely under conditions where hyper-partisan silencing and polarization have marginalized more basic and typically shared normative and political principles that taking political action specifically on behalf of such principles holds out the possibility of exemplifying and so at least powerfully reasserting them in political life and discourse. Such demonstration by exemplification is rendered possible in part precisely because those who engage in it must “stake something” on doing so in the form of working against their personal or partisan interests.

In this regard, recent politics in the United States provides two additional significant examples. The first is Congressman Justin Amash, a former Republican from the State of Michigan who called for President Trump’s impeachment already in May of 2019.³⁹ Amash’s basic reasoning was simple: that maintaining accountability and a system of checks and balances in the political system, as well as transparency of government, were more important than pursuing particular partisan goals at the expense of these things. Within three days of his arguments, the wealthy DeVos family (one member of the family, Betsy DeVos, was Secretary of Education for the Trump Administration) withdrew its financial support from Amash,⁴⁰ while the Trump Administration moved swiftly to find primary challengers to run against him.⁴¹ The other is Democratic Congresswoman from Michigan, Elissa Slotkin who, while a Democrat, occupies a seat in a significantly Republican Michigan district. Nevertheless, Slotkin voted to impeach then President Trump. Slotkin explained her decision in an op-ed in the *Detroit Free Press*.⁴² Like

39 Friedersdorf, Conor: A Republican Congressman’s Case for Impeaching Trump. In: *The Atlantic* <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/amash-impeachment/589783/> (19.5.2019)

40 Oosting, Jonathan/Nann Burke, Melissa: DeVos Family Ends Longtime Amash Support. In: *The Detroit News* <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2019/05/22/devos-family-ends-longtime-amash-support/3768422002/> (22.5.2019)

41 Perano, Ursula: Report: Trump Seeking Candidates to Primary Republican Justin Amash. In: *Axios* <https://www.axios.com/trump-amash-primary-challenger-impeachment-54455d83-d5a4-4fc7-bf91-c4503ceebcfo.html> (12.6.2020).

42 The Op-Ed can be found here, Slotkin, Elissa: How I Reached my Decision on Impeachment. In: *Detroit Free Press* <https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/2019/12/16/elissa-slotkin-trump-impeachment/2661079001/16.20.2019>, and for context, Gay Stolberg, Sheryl: Slotkin, Backing Impeachment, Draws Instant Protests, and Applause. In: *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/16/us/politics/slotkin-impeachment.html> (16.20.2019). In Slotkin’s case, at least, the risk she took in voting for impeachment did not prevent her from being reelected, Spangler, Todd: Slotkin Wins Reelection in 8th Congressional District.

Amash, she invoked fundamental ethical and political principles, such as that the powers of public political office ought not be a vehicle for personal political gain.⁴³ She did so while occupying a political office that gave her political powers, and she exemplified the principle that she advocated at least insofar as she used the powers and responsibilities of her political office in a way that clearly ran counter to her narrowly defined personal and political interests. It is difficult to say precisely how successful either Amash or Slotkin were in *persuading* people of the truth of the political principles their actions exemplified. As of now, Slotkin has won reelection to her congressional seat while Amash chose not to run for another term. However, their acts of exemplification are at least *more persuasive* precisely insofar as they defy the internal logic of hyper-partisan silencing.

Thus, whether successful or not in any particular case, Arendt's discussion of Socrates and of the power of moral exemplification suggests a potential strategy of resistance to conditions of hyper-partisan political silencing, one that can be seen at work in the actions of Zola and Clemenceau in the Dreyfus Affair, and also in some more recent examples from U.S. politics, and that calls on citizens and politicians alike to advocate for fundamental moral and political principles that might undermine hyper-partisan thinking and politics, and to be on the lookout for meaningful occasions in which to exemplify these even, and especially, when doing so may come at significant risk to one's personal or partisan interests.

5.2 Truth-Telling in Times of Universal Lying is Political Action

For Arendt it may thus be possible, at least for certain politicians or citizens who find themselves in certain circumstances, to demonstrate or reaffirm central moral and political principles by appropriately exemplifying them in the face of personal or partisan loss. As already discussed, she is much less optimistic about being able to do the same for

In: Detroit Free Press <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/04/elissa-slotkin-election/6112421002/> (4.11.2020).

⁴³ While the examples of Amash and Slotkin seem to fit Arendt's model of demonstration by exemplification, the United States is a very large country and most politicians do not or cannot perform similar exemplifications. In part, this is due to the fact that in many cases those who are pursuing what may be the truth, the right policies, or the defense of higher principles *also* have clear partisan and personal interests in the outcome. This is the unavoidable rhetorical grain of truth in the critique that, to take a recent example, the impeachment process of 2019 and the impeachment trial of 2020 were almost entirely one-party efforts. For this very reason, the typical Democrat is simply unable to clearly exemplify fundamental normative and political principles in their actions in such a way as to publicly verify them in an unambiguous or unimpugnable way (and of course, similar things are true for the average Republican already during the impeachment proceedings against former President Bill Clinton in 1998 – 99). On the other hand, it was almost impossible for a Republican congressperson or senator to object to the impeachment hearing on grounds that can be publicly perceived as anything but narrowly partisan, even if as a matter of fact some did have genuinely normative and principled reasons for doing so as well.

What all this creates, however, is a political space nearly devoid of moral-political exemplars. If Arendt is right in her invocation of Kant that practical moral concepts require an example in order to be grounded in intuition and so verified, the near total lack of identifiable examples in an entire political culture is likely to have negative epistemic effects and lead people to disbelieve or devalue the normative and political principles themselves. If Zagzebski and the psychological literature on moral elevation are right that our motivation to act virtuously is informed and enhanced by the experience of admiration for moral exemplars, then their systematic absence from public politics is likely to diminish our capacity for moral admiration and undermine our motivation for moral political action.

mere factual truths. Arendt does seem to carve out one possible exception to this, however, when she suggests the following:

“Only where a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle, and not only with respect to particulars, can truthfulness as such, unsupported by the distorting forces of power and interest, become a political factor of the first order. Where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event that he survives, he has made a start toward changing the world.” (565)

Arendt does not offer an illustration for this suggestive passage. However, the main idea is relatively clear. While under “ordinary” political circumstances, the mere assertion of factual truth is politically inert, under conditions of systematic lying where the politically motivated act of falsifying reality has become normal, asserting and standing by factual truth becomes a political action because of how clearly and categorically it stands opposed to the existing political reality. It seems that the most obvious illustration of this phenomenon would be an individual who, under rather complete or totalitarian conditions, asserts a factual truth that is in fact widely known, but is not discussed or acknowledged widely, if at all. As Arendt points out in a different context, “Even in Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Russia it was more dangerous to talk about concentration and extermination camps, whose existence was no secret, than to hold and to utter “heretical” views on anti-Semitism, racism, and Communism” (1967/2000, p. 552). So, we might imagine an example of the kind of factual truth-teller she has in mind as the citizen or functionary in Nazi Germany who insists, despite the widespread official and unofficial policy of lying about the matter, that there are concentration and extermination camps. Under such conditions, the mere assertion of this fact is also a political action since acknowledging it would directly contradict at least some parts of the political situation and project already underway.

Similarly, a citizen of Orwell’s fictitious Oceania might do this by publicly uttering that “Oceania *was* once at war with Eurasia” when the official party line is that Oceania was not and never had been at war with Eurasia, but that the enemy had always been Eastasia (Orwell, p. 79). Another example might be Dr. Rieux in Camus’ *The Plague* who, confronted by the collective hesitancy and self-deception of the leaders of the town of Oran who refuse to use the word ‘plague’ for what they are facing, rephrases the question in the more purely factual terms of whether half the citizens of the town are to die or not, a factual likelihood the officials had been avoiding (so lying, or at least self-deceiving about) up to this point (Camus, p. 47 – 51). More generally, “whistleblower” actions that reveal factual information that is uncomfortable for essentially *all* political partisans would seem to fall into this category as well. Examples here might include recent Washington Post reporting on systematic U.S. Government lying about the progress of the war in Afghanistan, or the whistleblowing of Edward Snowden about NSA wiretaps

and other spying, or of the anonymous source for the Panama Papers.⁴⁴ Thus, under the right conditions even the teller of factual truth seems able, by this very act, of reasserting its place in politics, at least once things have gotten bad enough. This suggestion requires an important proviso however.⁴⁵

The idea that truth-telling under conditions of universal lying in a political community amounts to or constitutes a kind of political action suggests that such truth-telling may be less effective, to the extent that it is effective in any case, under the conditions of hyper-partisan silencing that have been the thematic focus of this essay. After all, such conditions are more like conditions of “universal disagreement” than they are conditions of universal lying. What Arendt tells us is that once things get truly bad enough, truth-telling takes on a special political significance. However, as long as an issue remains squarely located in the sector of disagreement between partisan camps, mere fact-stating cannot yet take on this significance because the mere statement of facts alone does not yet clearly favor one partisan view over another, and can always be rejected or criticized by the other sides as a partisan stratagem.

While this seems correct to me, I still think there is a role for “truth-telling as political action” in disrupting or undermining conditions of hyper-partisan silencing, and this is precisely when a truth-teller manages to get ahold of and insist upon some factual truths that practically all partisans *are* interested in lying about, ignoring, or deceiving themselves about. While this represents a kind of compartmentalized “lying on principle”

44 For a basic timeline of the Snowden revelations, see NBC: Edward Snowden: A Timeline. In: *NBC News* <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/edward-snowden-interview/edward-snowden-timeline-n114871-26.5.2014>, on the Panama Papers see Lipton, Eric/Creswell, Julie: Panama Papers Show How Rich United States Clients Hid Millions Abroad. In: *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/06/us/panama-papers.html> (5.6.2016).

45 Two provisos, really. An important issue is that it would seem that there is some tension between Arendt’s claim, discussed above, that the factual truth-teller cannot demonstrate his truth by staking his life on it, and the claim just discussed that the factual truth-teller in a time of universal lying becomes a political actor. If merely asserting the truth in the face of great personal risk cannot help to demonstrate it, how might asserting the facts in the face of “universal lying” be likely to have any more success? Two points are relevant here. One is that Arendt did not promise much more likelihood of success in the current case than she did in the former. Just because a truth-teller in times of universal lying counts as a political actor, whereas normally she does not, does not mean that she will for this reason be successful. It is still important to recognize the way that certain political conditions, namely those of systematic and pervasive lying, transform the political significance of asserting factual truths, even if those assertions themselves are unlikely to get uptake. The second is that the suggestion that “a community has embarked on organized lying in principle” can be interpreted in different ways. Perhaps what it means is that literally everyone is directly lying about important matters. However, a more realistic interpretation is that some significant parts of government are systematically lying while others in government and in the broader political community are complicit by means of their silence or perhaps even their own self-deception (further aided and abetted by the fact that openly acknowledging the scale of the lying would call upon them, given commitments they already have, to take difficult action that would put themselves and their interests at risk). It is this latter kind of situation that my examples of a citizen or public official’s asserting that there are concentration camps in Nazi Germany, or Doctor Rioux’s asserting that the issue at hand is whether half the town’s population will die of disease in the context of the lying and self-deception of the officials of Oran, most clearly invoke. The political culture of silence and denial about concentration camps in Nazi Germany, the systematic lying and self-deception about plague amongst the officials of Oran, and the apparently bipartisan complicity of left and right together in the United States on issues such as NSA surveillance and misrepresentation of the success of the war in Afghanistan, all involve cases where there either are not clear partisan divisions, or where the political community is united in lying and self-deception on certain issues *despite* the existence of deeply polarized partisan commitments in many other areas. It is under conditions such as *these* that Arendt seems to suggest that factual truth-telling becomes a form of political action, action whose primary goal is to reassert the relevance of at least certain facts, and perhaps of facts themselves, in political life.

in the life of a political community, it is a significant one, and so one where the conditions for truth-telling as political action that Arendt describes obtain. If this is right, then it may be possible for truth-tellers in conditions of hyper-partisan silencing to become political actors regarding particular truths or areas of truth, and to destabilize the hyper-partisan epistemic dysfunction “from below”, by identifying and challenging collectively shared lies, self-deception, and complicity that cut across party lines. It is arguably this that things such as Edward Snowden’s revelations about NSA wiretapping and other kinds of government spying, the Occupy Wallstreet movement, revelations about government misrepresentation of the war in Afghanistan, and perhaps even the climate change activism of someone like Greta Thunberg seeks to accomplish. While risky and not guaranteed to succeed, truth-telling of this sort and under these conditions has the potential to destabilize conditions of hyper-partisan silencing from below, by asserting politically significant truths that cannot be easily dismissed as aligned with any particular partisan commitments, and thereby also perhaps reasserting the fundamental political significance of facts and of truth-telling itself.

6. Conclusion

In the foregoing I have identified hyper-partisan silencing as a type of silencing of political discourse in which political discourse participants as such systematically suffer a negative identity prejudice that causes their discursive contributions to be seen as insincere and so as not credible because motivated by purely partisan interests regardless of concerns about fact, truth, or principle. I have relied on Hannah Arendt’s discussion of truth and lying in politics to illuminate and partially explain this phenomenon, and on suggestive passages in her work to suggest that conditions of hyper-partisan silencing might be resisted “from above” by means of persuasion by exemplification in action in the case of fundamental moral and political principles, and “from below” in the case of truth-telling as political action. While both strategies can be implemented only under particular conditions that are not available to all political agents at all times, and neither is guaranteed success by any means, both represent principled and potentially persuasive responses to the dysfunctional political condition of hyper-partisan silencing.

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