Discussing Truth, Modes of Deception and the Illusion of the Obvious

Introduction by the Editor

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Abstract

The introduction of the editor explains research context and research objectives of the topic, highlights the most important insights and demonstrates relations among the contributions collected in the volume. The papers, written by young and senior researchers, on the one hand, discuss aspects of truth and various modes of deception like insincerity, whitewashing, or bullshit, all of which set forth destroying forces and eroding democratic processes. On the other hand, the papers address phenomena of dissolving and eroding the reliability of collective efforts to maintain truth and sanctions on deception, especially when they are linked to dangerous reductionist movements and hermetic subgroups which systematically prevent the efforts of peacebuilding measures and make anti-democratic movements settle to an extent that endangers cohesion and collective identity within Europe.

Keywords


Actual political and social developments are experienced as a crisis of conventions and certainty once considered reliable – including truth itself. Whether in political or media settings, the construction of facts, events, and identities is becoming increasingly polarized. How are the rhetorical strategies and pragmatic effects of these constructions to be understood? Which hermeneutical approaches can foster further understanding? What does this show
about conceptions of truth? And what is the contribution of religion and theology – both in exemplary historic constellations as well as in our contemporary debates?

At the Bonn Institute of Hermeneutics, we address questions like that at international, interdisciplinary and intergenerational conferences as the institute’s program of a hermeneutic of social culture depends on the exchange of international researchers of all age groups. On the one hand, hermeneutics and philosophy of religion itself are venerable disciplines in which we still read our classics such as Gadamer or Ricoeur, Kant or Schelling, and repeat old questions such as “What is truth?” On the other hand, we practice our hermeneutical understanding from within a social world that is undergoing such rapid changes, challenging constellations, tensions and conflicts that we cannot understand without pluriform cross generational perceptions and viewpoints.

In 2017, we started working on the topic with the conference and prize question “Thou Shall Not Lie. Hermeneutics of the Use of the Post-Factual”. The idea came up following the presidential elections in the USA in 2016 and the accompanying debates on fake news and the new political and societal acceptance of deception, its function of expressing and projecting what people are longing for, as well as their dangerous legitimation through the notion of the post-factual. Hence, we discussed aspects like deception, distortion, insincerity, whitewashing, or bullshit, all of which set forth destroying forces and eroding democratic processes, especially as they rather often come along with the critique of constructivist, symbolic resp. iconic or performative theories.

It is, however, intriguing to understand that such dynamics must not only be subject to moral critique but that we have to ask for the reasons, structures and demands that allow for the public acceptance of deception. This is even more important as lying and deceiving are at the same time constitutive for human agency: Human beings conceal or deny or even lie about things not only with the intention to harm others but also to guard them – and sometimes they even rightly do so as e.g. in fighting for survival in totalitarian regimes. Among the most interesting aspects are projections driven by longing and desire: their role is to shape the world as it is desired and hoped for, just like it can be constructed and performatively set into action on social media, affecting and demanding everyday political action. And, finally, we also have to ask whether it is truth that is self-evident or, on the contrary, rather illusion that is self-evident. Hence, the understanding of truth and deception demands anew investigations of truth in relation to facticity, truthfulness, or fiction. How is truth to be measured, what are its criteria, how is deception related to our current affairs? Is there a turn, re-turn or even a rhythm of deception in speech and literature? What about deception and loss of trust or loss of identity?
Even though we did find interesting answers to the questions we raised in our first conference and the prize question, the topic has not at all lost its urgent importance. Therefore, in 2020, we decided to continue the debate in a second conference under the title “The Illusion of Certainty. Rhetorics and Pragmatics of Strategic Engagement with Truth and Reliability in Times of Political and Social Crisis”. Once more we focused on the dynamics of phenomena dissolving and eroding the reliability of collective efforts to maintain truth and sanctions on deception. This time, the topic was driven by the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic has not become an explicit topic in the volume, but it was and still is accompanied by the quest for social cohesion in the face of what used to be self-evident in epistemological, doxological and practical respects. We do not yet know about the long-term consequences of imposing extreme challenges on medical systems and especially on health-care professionals, of the long-term influence of social distancing, isolation and loneliness of risk groups and the extraordinary high costs in economic respects, to name but a few. In the meantime, as we are about to publish the papers in spring 2022, the situation has become even more difficult through the crisis in Ukraine resp. the military aggression inflicted upon them. This development in addition to everything addressed above challenges our conviction on the reliability of democratic structures, the primate of diplomacy and the common endeavor for peaceful cooperation. At the moment, we cannot yet see an end to the dangerous reductionist movements and hermetic subgroups which systematically prevent the efforts of peacebuilding measures and encourage anti-democratic movements to settle in the middle of our society to an extent that endangers cohesion and collective identity within Europe. Hence, again, the issues at stake call for the hermeneutical quest for truth, truth claims and truth denials. Theories of truth are needed in the same way as theories of deception and illusion.

The results of these cross generational discussions are presented in this volume. Each paper is introduced by an abstract so that readers will easily find their way through the entire volume. The papers collected try to shed light on single aspects of the manifold questions at hand, some of them from a historical perspective, some of them from analytic or systematic perspectives or from the perspective of literary sciences, but all of them joined in the interest in theology, philosophy of religion, literature sciences, political theory and social and cultural theories. The lineup is opened with two papers presenting the topic in a very general and hence perfectly introductory way: The first paper is contributed by Volker Kronenberg, who sketches the topic from the perspective of political sciences and reflects on the severe consequences of the loss of certainties in the spheres of democratic politics and highly differentiated societies. The second paper is presented by Thorben Alles, who contributes to the
discourse from the perspective of systematic theology on how to understand the concept of truth facing the manyfold ascriptions of truth that seem to have their own right and thus have to be related.

The next two papers are authored by Eytan Celik, who is currently working on “Handlungsursachen und das Problem der Zurechnung bei Kant” and hence presents a piece of work on Kant for which she was awarded the third place by the prize question jury. The other paper is submitted by Martin Breul, who takes us further on the philosophical timeline to Hannah Arendt and Harry G. Frankfurt and discusses lies, bullshit or propaganda in reference to deliberative democracy – for this approach, the jury awarded him the first place in the prize question. We congratulate Martin Breul and Eytan Celik for their outstanding contributions!

With the next paper, systematic theologian Hartmut Rosenau contributes the perspective of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the relation of truth, deception and truthfulness. He is accompanied by another paper within the temporal and topical domain of Bonhoeffer and Arendt, but here we switch the perspective to literature sciences: Bettine Siertsema, coming from the Netherlands, presents an intriguing investigation of the tension between fact and fiction in Holocaust literature. The line of papers is continued with a contribution by the Argentinian philosopher Martín Grassi, and the perspective changes again, now towards a philosophical reflection written in the mode of a piece of literature on hermeneutics: “Hermes and the philosophy of the improper”. It is followed by the paper of Kurt Appel (Vienna) who joins Grassi in the constructive and innovative style of doing philosophy, now referring to Schelling and the Gospel of Mark (Mk 16, 1–8), stressing the self-evidence of illusion.

The two concluding papers take our perspective back to the history of theology and philosophy, presented by scholars from systematic theology: Paul Silas Peterson discusses the public sphere of democracy and the wisdom tradition. Folkart Wittekind presents the notion of theological truth in processes of modernity, referring to August Dorner and Wilhelm Herrmann. Hence, in the end, we come back to the development of modernity for which – in Continental Philosophy and Theology – the heritage of the classical German philosophy from Kant to Schelling remains pioneering work even today.

The Bonn Institute of Hermeneutics at the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Bonn hosted the conferences and the prize question in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Religionsphilosophie and the Transdisciplinary Research Area “Individuals, Institutions and Societies” of the University of Bonn whom it is a great pleasure to thank for their generous institutional and financial support. As the editor of the volume I also express my
gratitude to all those who supported the project with their extremely interesting papers and the lively discussions! Furthermore, the program allowed us to foster the research collaboration between the Faculty of Protestant Theology, the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bonn, and the Centre for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society (RaT), located at the University of Vienna – an interaction which requires my utmost thanks and which promises to flourish in the years to come! The chance to publish this volume in the Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society (JRAT), represented among others by Kurt Appel, is another outstanding opportunity for which I am deeply grateful! Last but not least, my thanks go to all those who have taken the laborious task of getting the papers actually ready for print: Helmut Jakob Deibl and Hannah Bleckenwegner at the Centre for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society at the University of Vienna and Thorben Alles and Jana Puschke at the Bonn Institute for Hermeneutics. Without their constant professional, patient and friendly support, the volume would not have been possible. Any mistakes that may have passed our eyes unnoticed are of course to be claimed by the editor.

Bonn and Vienna in March 2022

Biography

Dr. Cornelia Richter (*1970), since 2012 professor for systematic philosophy at the University of Bonn, Co-Director of the Bonn Institute for Hermeneutics, and currently Dean of the Faculty of Protestant Theology Bonn.

From 1989–1995 Richter studied Protestant Theology and Philosophy in Vienna and Munich, in 2002 she finished her PhD in Systematic Theology at the University of Marburg (“Die Religion in der Sprache der Kultur. Schleiermacher und Cassirer – Kulturphilosophische Symmetrien und Divergenzen”, Tübingen 2004), from 2003–2005 she was Assistant Research Professor at the Center for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen; in 2010 she finished her habilitation in Systematic Theology at the Philipps-University of Marburg (“Bodenloses Vertrauen. Performanzphänomen in Humanwissenschaften und Theologie”).

Major research interests: philosophy of religion, hermeneutics, dogmatic theology; in 2014 Richter started the interdisciplinary research project on “Resilience in Religion and Spirituality”, combining humanities and life-sciences (since 2019 funded as DFG-Research Group 2686).