

## AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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On Lying: Writing Philosophical History after the Enlightenment and after Arendt

Sophia Rosenfeld

PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY IS an old genre when it comes to writing about the past. In the Western tradition, its roots stretch deep into antiquity. It is the continental Enlightenment, however, that has claims to giving philosophical history—and particularly, that uncomfortably close relative of intellectual history, *l'histoire de l'esprit humain*—both its greatest hits and its characteristic modern form. From Montesquieu onward, proponents of philosophical history have taken the unfolding of human reason, in conjunction with variation in climate and geography and changing institutional, religious, social, and especially political circumstances, to be the great subject of human history. Enlightened practitioners have also insisted that normative conclusions, "laws" even, can be adduced from the study of these developments in all their interrelated complexity. That includes the long record of errors and lies that paved the way for the gradual triumph of truth.<sup>1</sup>

Today most university-based historians remain unconvinced, to put it mildly. Philosophical history is now widely seen as a problematic tradition, smacking of equal parts intellectual hubris and failure to understand the effects of time or cultural difference. Indeed, philosophical history in the enlightened mode might be said to be that which most historians have been working against ever since the creation of the modern academy. The professionalization of history, followed by the growth of disciplinarity and specialization, first in the German university in the late eighteenth century and later in western European and American ones, spelled the formal end of such projects.<sup>2</sup> A more historicizing, contextual approach to ideas, in which thoughts became anchored to particular interests and purposes, replaced the history of the human mind writ large, along

with any notion of history's unfailing destiny. Moreover, explicit statements of general ethical and philosophical commitments gave way to localism or particularism, on the one hand, and empiricism, on the other, indicating a very different kind of scientific commitment than the search for universal laws of human nature or society. These days we read the great nomothetic histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether by Voltaire or Marx, as historical artifacts ripe for contextualization in their own right. But we—meaning professional historians and, especially, intellectual historians—rarely take up their subjects or emulate their methods.<sup>3</sup> That might be especially true in the context of American intellectual history. Strong arguments against the display of moral or metaphysical speculation and for the epistemological modesty of the modern professional historian continue to this day unabated, not least in the Anglophone world.

But it is worth asking. Why this enduring animosity—and might it be misplaced? Are historians—unlike philosophers, political theorists, literary critics, or scholars in most other disciplines—right to be so wary of direct engagement with the pressing political, ethical, or metaphysical issues of their own times?

One argument for rethinking the possibilities inherent in philosophical history can be made on negative grounds: that it is simply impossible for historians to avoid philosophical commitments no matter how hard they try. According to this line of reasoning, despite professional historians' endless (deluded) insistence on neutrality and distance, the sympathies of historians, and even their reasons for choosing the topic under examination, are rarely so deeply buried that the reader cannot identify them with ease. Given this fact, the avoidance of explicit normative conclusions becomes, at best, perverse, and at worst, a form of dishonesty in its own right.

But a different argument for a revival of philosophical history can be made on more positive grounds. By this logic, what distinguishes serious historians from mere antiquarians is, starting in the Enlightenment, the recognition that the study of history can provide evidence and a set of arguments that allow one to engage directly in meaningful debates about the present. Philosophical history, in this view, represents one path to that goal: full participation in contemporary intellectual life, including the realm of political ideas, rather than relegation to the sidelines as purveyors of "background" or "context" for the claims of others.

In this chapter, I attempt to build a positive case specifically for an Enlightenment-inspired history of the human mind considered in concert with the history of politics and social life. This is not intended to be a critique of contextual intellectual history in any of the forms in which it is currently commonly practiced. Rather, it should be read as a plea, by one *dix-huitiémiste*, for intellectual historians of Europe and America alike to reconsider the legitimacy of an old, alternative approach to ideas, one that links historians more closely to the concerns of philosophers, political theorists, and engaged citizens—that is, to salient conversations about key issues in the world around us now.

To make this case, though, I would like to direct attention forward to one of philosophical history's most important recent practitioners, the German-Jewish thinker

Hannah Arendt. I also want to focus on some of Arendt's most present-minded work: her essays on political lying, written between the end of the 1960s and the first years of the 1970s, after Arendt had already lived through more than six decades of the twentieth century on two continents. In offering up this example, I am decidedly not advancing a brief for treating Arendt as a source of empirical historical truths; she famously got a lot about the past wrong. Nor is it my ambition to advocate the application of Arendt's theoretical claims to the historical findings of others. What is at stake here is not the use value or even validity of her political philosophy. My interest in Arendt stems in this context from Arendt's own complicated relationship to the history writing of the French Enlightenment.

Arendt belonged to a generation of postwar European-turned-American thinkers that-much like Voltaire and her other philosophe predecessors, albeit for different reasons—operated largely outside the confines of departments, universities, or even national conventions and allegiances and thus had little interest in the policing of boundaries between disciplines. Arendt can also be said to have taken up the classic Enlightenment project of considering the history of truth-telling and lies and, in the process, worked out a philosophy of history very much in the spirit of Voltaire. But it is in her departures from the classic mode of writing l'histoire de l'esprit humain or l'histoire de l'esprit critique—the way she broke the rules in practice— that she offers intellectual historians a viable example of a potential way forward. What follows, then, is a brief account of Arendt's two essays on dissimulation and an even briefer manifesto for a new kind of histoire philosophique written in the wake not only of the Enlightenment but, even more, of Arendt, an expert student of both the normative and the historical dimensions of the lie.

Arendt was well ensconced in her second life as University Professor at The New School in New York, when, in 1967, she published "Truth and Politics," an essay essentially about the long history of mendacity in public life. The text opens with a rather plaintive and strictly philosophical question, one lacking all the self-assurance associated with  $\label{prop:second} A \textit{rendt's eighteenth-century predecessors: "[I]s it the very essence of truth to be impotent."}$ and the very essence of power to be deceitful?" Yet Arendt's answer—or more precisely, resulting meditation—is constructed almost entirely by looking backward. "Truth and Politics" provides a meandering tour of various ancient and early modern thinkers, from Herodotus to Spinoza to James Madison, and of events in the deep and recent past, including the writing of the American Declaration of Independence, France's refusal of accountability for its role in World War II, and the erasure of Trotsky from Soviet history books. Moreover, much like the rest of Arendt's writing, this essay strongly reflects the author's personal experience of displacement and estrangement: as a German-Jewish woman in geographic, linguistic, and cultural exile in the wake of Nazism; as a professor at a non-traditional institution who never wanted or really had a chance to be

what she pejoratively called a "professional thinker"; and as the focus of public moral outrage in the wake of her earlier writing on the trial of the Final Solution architect, Adolf Eichmann. "Truth and Politics" is, in other words, for all its normative framing, steeped both in Arendt's knowledge of the history of thought and politics and in her own, very particular historical situatedness between European totalitarianism and postwar American democracy.

Furthermore, despite the opening assumption that politics and deception are always linked in some fundamental fashion, Arendt advances a highly historicist claim. Just as all forms of truth are not the same across time and space, not all forms of lying in the past are identical either—in form or in effect. In Arendt's telling, prior to the seventeenth century, when what constituted truth was transformed in the wake of the twin impetuses of the Scientific Revolution and Puritanism, lying could be viewed primarily as a useful tool in the "arsenal" of political action. Directed against enemies, it generally failed to generate the moral charge and severe disapprobation that it does in the modern world.

On the whole, Arendt is sympathetic to this earlier attitude; in many ways, she suggests, early modern lying was more benign, especially when compared to the alternatives. Far worse, she had already proposed in On Revolution (1963), is the coercive search for unqualified truthfulness that characterized the Reign of Terror. The same goes, she argues in "Truth and Politics," for the "total lie" of modern totalitarian regimes, when all of reality has become phony and the boundaries between truth and lying have been blurred to the degree that even the liar is caught up in the lie, unable to distinguish between the two. By the end, Arendt emerges as the defender of a particular, moderate, now largely obsolete kind of political lying. She refers to the source material of the justifiable political lie as "factual truths," meaning "truths seen and witnessed with the eyes of the body, not the eyes of the mind" and produced by "men living together" (237, 231). What makes deception about factual truths (as opposed to "rational truths" like two plus two equals four) hard to condemn in every instance is its potential function as a tool of persuasion in vigorous, democratic debate.

Outside of totalitarian environments, truth telling is, Arendt opines in characteristically contrarian mode, inherently conservative, a way to preserve the status quo and close down discussion by requiring assent. Thinking politically, Arendt reminds us by way of contrast, requires recognition of multiple points of view. Thus, for Arendt, the lie as action, exercised in the realm of the free exchange of opinions, is significantly less dangerous and more invigorating than either the systemic dissembling of totalitarian environments or the constant, coercive zeal for truthfulness characteristic of much modern political life in the West. It is simply a political instrument. The great danger of the modern world, Arendt concludes, is that the hierarchy between politics and lying has been reversed, and politics has begun to operate in service to a particular and fictitious world of ersatz truth.

But "Truth and Politics" was not to be Arendr's last word on the subject. Four years later, in 1971, she took up topic of political lies again, this time in relation to a very

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contemporary, real-life event rather than a philosophical query. The scandal caused by the leak to the New York Times, mid-Vietnam War, of the so-called Pentagon Papers commissioned by then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, provided the impetus. "Lying in Politics," with its subtitle "Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," is an effort to make sense, in light of the erudition and theoretical conclusions of the earlier "Truth and Politics," of a specific (and, in Arendt's view, historically anomalous) case of exposed deception that was unfolding as she wrote. Indeed, the essay can be seen as part of Arendt's ongoing postwar effort to envision what Elizabeth Young-Bruehl calls "a new science of politics for a world in which political events—world war, totalitarianism, atomic bombings—demand serious attention from philosophers," and the engaged thinker's task is to provide these phenomena with a meaningful etymology.<sup>7</sup>

So how does Arendt explain the "quicksand of lying statements of all sorts" (4) that is to be found in the Pentagon Papers? Her answer is that the present, as exemplified in this contemporary scandal, represents yet another departure or caesura: the emergence of two unprecedented and distinctly unappealing forms of prevarication specific to their context and moment. One is public relations or "spin," the manufacturing of pseudotruths and massaging of information to deceive the public. The other is the special kind of lying characteristic of the self-deceiving technocrat, who starts with the theory and makes the facts fit accordingly because he is so convinced of his own rightness and expertise. Whereas the adman makes images that lie, the technocrat, living in a "defactualized world" (35), lies out of a sense of duty to uphold the images already in place. The shock for the public stems from the revelation of the particular nature and pervasiveness of the deceit. Once again, in other words, the answer is highly historical in form.

Arendt's conclusion could be said to be but an addendum to her comments of four years earlier. Another stage in a continuing sorry history of the political lie is revealed to us. In another sense, though, "Lying in Politics" takes us all the way back to a project that began with Arendt's major early work, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951). For in all her writing, Arendt could be said to have used the analysis of the present moment, on the one hand, and the study of the twists, turns, reversals, and departures in the historical record, on the other, to carry on a conversation about the nature of politics and, ultimately, about the nature of history (or what Arendt calls "factual truth") itself. In "Lying and Politics," philosophy helps illuminate a specific, concrete historical event in Arendr's own present: the brouhaha around the Pentagon Papers. The novelty of what is revealed only becomes apparent in light of a long history of difference. But thinking about this event and its historical singularity, or "particular, concrete experience," in the words of Arendt's chief biographer, also "sets her [Arendt] wondering, exploring" and leads to new philosophical and, indeed, normative conclusions—about human nature, about different forms of knowledge, about the realm of politics in the modern age and what it means for lies to be pressed into remaking reality.8 Seyla Benhabib similarly describes, in an evocative series of metaphors, Arendt's method of writing political theory as dependent on "digging under the rubble of history so as to recover those

'pearls' of past experience, with their sedimented and hidden layers of meaning, to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future." In writing about moments in the long history of political lying, Arendt was also advancing a theory of the historian's relationship to truth aimed at the world to come.

Here is also where the echoes of Enlightenment thought grow strong. Just about two hundred years earlier, Voltaire, in one of the great statements about the work of the historian, had decided to add to his enormous Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations, et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire, depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII (1756) an extra volume, a discours préliminaire dedicated to what he called "the philosophy of history." 10 In this extended introduction, Voltaire had made the case that the purpose of history writing in the present was twofold: to supply useful knowledge to one's contemporaries, but also to identify and correct the myths, errors, and other forms of falsehoods that generally passed for the historical record. Much of this preliminary volume thus reads as a chronicle of how, when, why, and with what effects people, and especially powerful people, in the deep past made up stories about what had happened to them or others. And Voltaire, like Arendt, proves to be just as interested in the means by which various kinds of "absurdities" (i.e., magic, miracles) and lies were crafted and then transmitted to posterity as is in their actual content. One chapter, entitled "Of a Falsehood [mensonge] of Flavian Josephus, relating to Alexander and the Jews," details how a deliberate lie from on high could morph into received knowledge. The next, called "Of Popular Prejudices, to Which the Sacred Writers Have Deigned to Conform through Condescension," lays out an alternate route and set of motivations by which false accounts of the past made their way down to the present. And so it goes. The final chapter, tellingly, takes up the lies of political figures or "legislators who have spoken in the name of god" and thereby committed intellectual crimes for the ages (314). For exposé of past forms of prevarication becomes here much more than an academic exercise. Reconstructing and writing good (which is to say, myth-busting) history marks, according to the philosophe, a first step in the fight against illegitimate power and corruption in his own world and a means to advance that elusive but highly sought after cause: truth.

Arendt comes to a related conclusion, though she is significantly more skeptical about truth as the endpoint for any human narrative. History, in her essays of the late 1960s and early 1970s, is that which is always subject to manipulation and even falsification. The "contingency" of all "factual reality," notes Arendt in "Truth and Politics," makes possibilities for lies and prevarication "boundless" (257). This should not, however, be considered a condition unique to the deep past. Deception has become all the more prevalent, Arendt suggests, since the First World War, when public life began to be dominated by mendacity and denial, particularly about occurrences in the past. Radical destruction—of books and archives containing historical testimony, of people and their memories—became part and parcel of forwarding new lies in the present and future.

Nevertheless, Arendt refuses total despair about history's epistemological status. History writing, or the assertion of factual truth on the part of witnesses, also emerges

in these essays as the only real antidote to the modern reign of untruth—much as it did for Voltaire. The example of Trotsky is germane to both sides of the coin. It was possible, Arendt points out in "Truth and Politics," to edit him out of the historical record, as the Soviets did. But given the difficulty of full erasure and the total destruction of memory, it was also sure that he would eventually return from the realm of the repressed—thus allowing him ultimately to serve as a necessary corrective, a means of puncturing this reign of untruth. The journalist or chronicler who works to reveal such erasures and heal them becomes, like Daniel Ellsberg or possibly Arendt herself, a political actor in his or her own right. Political action creates history, but history writing, when it is not in service to a lie but instead imagined as a counterweight, has the potential to alter the political future, even to help foster a truly participatory politics. As Arendt explains it, "[W]hen everybody lies about everything of importance, the truthteller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event he survives. he has made a start toward changing the world" (251). Arendt, as others before me have noted, takes the work of the historian to be critical to the status of the truth in the public sphere even as she refuses the quasi-scientific pretensions of many of her historian contemporaries. 11 History writing is envisioned, at its best, as a deeply political act, a confrontation with the most insidious forms of manipulation and public lying. A philosophical history of lying and politics is thus, in the end, also the source of a (political) philosophy of history, a set of normative claims about the use value of attempting to record the history of truth.

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But what if we were to take Arendt's two texts less as interventions in the philosophy of history than as examples of philosophical history, a type of history writing with its own past? What if we were, in other words, to consider the two texts under discussion as artifacts belonging to a history of history writing, particularly one that has flourished outside the disciplinary boundaries associated with the modern research university, where the task of providing laws and moral conclusions was largely shunted off to philosophy and political theory programs? Here, despite certain elements of continuity with eighteenth-century models or even with the great historical works of Alexis de Tocqueville, a thinker with whom Arendt shared twin preoccupations with the violence of the French Revolution and with the oddness of modern American life, 12 we might be struck much more by Arendt's heresies. Based on those differences, one could argue that Arendr's essays on political lying offer us one model for how, in the face of two-hundredyear-old disciplinary boundaries, we might return to writing history and philosophy together or, in Arendt's simpler terms, "think what we are doing," without falling into all the traps associated with Voltaire's histoire de l'esprit humain. 13 For whether or not we agree with Arendt's conclusions—and certainly there is room to debate the novelty of spin or to disagree with her benign account of the early modern lie—Arendt introduces in these essays of 1967 and 1971 several innovations in approach that are worth noticing if we are indeed interested in the continuing evolution of thinking about past forms of

thinking. Let me briefly point to three characteristics—the treatment of space and time, the treatment of thought, and the treatment of normative conclusions or "truths"—that distinguish Arendt's approach to the past in practice and make it (to my mind) an appealing foundation on which to imagine a new strain of American intellectual history rooted in a renewal of the tradition of writing the philosophical history of lying.

First, most obviously, Arendt refused—much like her Enlightenment forebears—to restrict her purview to any one national or temporal setting when writing about events or ideas in the world. She did so, however, in an idiosyncratic fashion. Well before it became the commonplace it is today, Arendt demonstrated the possibility of thinking about the United States and the rest of the world in the same frame, with novelty and imitation running in multiple directions. <sup>14</sup> She also, more radically, turned her back on unidirectional time or the linear genealogy assumed by most chroniclers of the history of ideas, including both her eighteenth-century predecessors and those interested in the once-again fashionable intellectual *longue durée*. <sup>15</sup> Instead, she advanced a kind of pluritemporal history of ideas, where exemplary instances could be situated in specific contexts but also shown to have connections to one another across the chasm of time and, ultimately, to us in the present—all without necessarily insisting on any demonstrable forms of "influence."

Like her contemporary, Walter Benjamin, Arendt saw her task as illuminating breaks in continuity, failures, moments of transformation, or what she calls in *Life of the Mind* "a *fragmented* past." But she simultaneously insisted on a temporal interdependency forged out of anthropological universalism or the essential sameness of human nature. This dualism is what gave Arendt license to hopscotch among the historical contexts that most interested her: the ancient world; the trans-Atlantic age of revolutions; and her own global present, including totalitarianism, decolonization, and the Vietnam War. What is more, she could be and was, in many of her essays, conversing at the same time with her future interlocutors (i.e., us) and with the long dead Immanuel Kant. For Arendt, engagement, or thinking as a prelude to action in the world, meant taking seriously what the literary critic Rita Felski calls, in a nice phrase, "the hectic traffic between the past and the present." This is a privilege that today's intellectual historians—turned—philosophical historians might want to seize: the opportunity to roam across chronology as well as place in pursuit of resonance along with difference.

Second, Arendt took a distinctive approach to the basic subject matter of intellectual or philosophical history, the world of thought. Again, we can see echoes of the old histoire de l'esprit humain, not least in her essential focus on the connection between the unfolding of the life of the mind, on the one hand, and past political formations, on the other. But in many of the particulars, Arendt points the way toward a different approach to both. Arendt continually drew her readers' attention not just to discrete ideas, or the content of the minds of thinkers in the varied times and spaces that concerned her. She also, as in her essays on the practice of lying, repeatedly forced her audience to notice varied habits of mind or behaviors generally analyzed under

the rubric of cognitive psychology: contemplating, judging, remembering (which is also to say, historicizing), communicating with others. Reason, both the subject and the method associated with the philosophical history of the Enlightenment, here becomes but one part of humans' intellectual makeup and not necessarily the dominant one at that. Arendt also took as great an interest in the intellectual practices of ordinary, anonymous people (sometimes called "citizens," other times "the masses") going about their daily lives as she did in those of a society's leading lights. For Arendt believed that political and social modalities, including democracy and totalitarianism, depended as much on shifts in little-noted norms of collective mental behavior (and vice versa) as they did on the key explicit ideas—like liberty or revolution or, for that matter, truth—that typically consume the attention of intellectual historians and historians of political thought.

Moreover, although Arendt urged special attention be given to moments of rupture in this story—what the philosophes had called "revolutions of the human mind" and had similarly coordinated with breakthroughs and crises in the larger story of the development of human happiness, manners, wealth, social organization, and, especially, political structure18—she refused to see all of history building toward one epistemological or political norm. Voltaire, Condorcet, and most of their contemporaries in the writing of the history of l'esprit humain were unrelentingly optimistic, telling stories that, for all their twists and occasional downturns, were essentially tales of historical providentialism, with perfection as the final stage and close at hand. Arendt, by contrast, was pessimistic about the state of the world in which she found herself (Benhabib speaks of the "melancholia" underlining her efforts to take stock of the present 19). She decisively rejected, not surprisingly in light of the century she was living through, any starry-eyed account of the triumph of reason or the critical spirit over superstition, or any grand narrative at all, much less one focused on the steady development of the collective mind. For Arendt also put no stock in the old, Lockean parallel between individual and collective cognitive development. Much of her message was about the current vulnerability of meaningful mental activity or intellectual exchange, especially in light of the conditions of modernity (though she continued to take thoughtfulness and judging in common, themselves both dependent on historical consciousness, as a goal). Her innovation was to find a way to turn epistemology into a thoroughly historicized subject, essential to understanding the more obvious developments that generally occupy historians' attention.

To make this claim is not, of course, to suggest that Arendt has been alone in the past fifty years in reviving the study of the historical significance of various modes of mental life or ways of arriving (or not) at truth. Jürgen Habermas, too, among modern philosophers tried in the beginning of his career to write the history of critical thinking and link it to the rise and subsequent atrophying of political life in the west.20 Over the last two decades, historians of science have also drawn our attention to a wide range of now commonplace mental habits and categories, from being curious to relying upon facts, that turn out to be historically particular despite their supposed neutrality and ahistoricity.21 But Habermas limited his focus in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962) to one mode of thought, taking eighteenth-century spokesmen literally as the rational thinkers they claimed to be. Historians of science, meanwhile, with a few exceptions, have generally taken up the project of documenting alternative modes of thought or sentiment with the single end goal of explaining the emergence and maintenance of scientific or social scientific practice; their ambition has typically been to show that the supposed objectivity of science is itself a socially and culturally constructed, which is to say historical, invention.22

Arendt's work, by contrast, broadly demonstrates the potential benefits of exploring temporally and geographically particular mental habits in terms of their varied political resonances. That is, she took her goal to be exposing the way plural modes of reflecting and communicating have, quite often unobserved and unremarked upon, shaped the world of power and lived social relations. She also illustrated in practice how differently this process has played out once one turns away from the rarified world of the natural and physical or even social sciences, which have steadily deviated from politics in terms of epistemological norms even as public policy has been given a quasi-scientific cast. In the end, as her essays on lying demonstrate, Arendt hoped to call attention to the commonplace habits of mind that are formed by and then help to perpetuate participatory or "real" democracy, as opposed to totalitarianism or other forms of authoritarian politics, past or present. Now, when political theorists are as interested in the epistemological as in the moral foundations of democracy,<sup>23</sup> Arendt's writing should prompt us to reflect on how those of us eager to learn about and from the past might contribute to this conversation.

For third, and most significantly, Arendt built on these connections to offer a take on the historian's relationship to truth in practice that distinguished her work from that of most historians either in the eighteenth or in the twentieth century. This is not to deny certain key points of continuity with the tradition of Voltaire. Through her own example, she continually made the (old) case that the analysis of the ancient as well as recent past, along with their points of continuity and discontinuity, could be used to contemplate and then comment upon the pressing ethical, political and philosophical quandaries of the present and future—even, as we have seen, to arrive at normative conclusions.<sup>24</sup> Arendt's examples served as the basis for her own judgments and, she hoped, the subsequent judgments of her engaged, lay readers; the target audience for her historically inflected New Yorker and New York Review of Books articles of the late 1960s and 1970s was not so different from the people whom Voltaire called his lecteurs philosophiques.25 Indeed, her taste for dispensing lessons or culminating morals has led some commentators to insist that this is what made her unmodern or, at best, reluctantly modern, even as she often took the modern world as her subject matter. 26 But in a twist that links Arendt to Tocqueville, though not to Voltaire or Marx, what is to be learned is, much of the time, about historical variability itself.

Even as she tried to derive principles from the full sweep of history and kept Kant, her primary interlocutor, firmly in her sights, Arendt continually rooted those principles in plurality, meaning the multiplicity of perspectives across time and within any given in plurality, meaning the multiplicity of perspectives across time and within any given in plurality, meaning the multiplicity of perspectives across time and within any given in plurality, meaning the multiplicity of perspectives across time and within any given in plurality, meaning the multiplicity of perspectives across time and within any given in plurality, meaning the multiplicity of perspectives across time and within any given in plurality, arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description of Ian Hacking, one might even argue that Arendt is best understood self-description. Borrowing the variety, especially at the level of the mind, and the dangers of its negation. Borrowing the variety, especially at the level of the mind, and the dangers of its negation. Borrowing the variety, especially at the level of the mind, and the dangers of its negation. Borrowing the variety, especially at the level of the mind, and the dangers of its negation. Borrowing the variety of the mind, and the dangers of its negation. Borrowing the variety of the mind, and the dangers of its negation. Borrowing the variety, especially and within any given in plurality of the negation. Borrowing the variety of the negation. Borrowing the variety of the negation and within any give

This is also what brings us back to the charge of presentism: a risk to which all historians fear succumbing, a crime from the vantage point of the profession wherever and whenever it conspicuously rears its head. Certainly, we can agree that the danger always remains in this kind of explicitly engaged history writing—as Condorcet, composing his future-oriented Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain in prison at the time of the French Revolution, demonstrates even more abundantly than Voltaire—that the past will be distorted to suit current political agendas or to provide moral dicta tailored to one's contemporary peers. On the contrary, we need historians to continue to be wary of false continuities, anachronisms, and ignorance of the work of time, all of which arguably pervade contemporary, twenty-first-century American and maybe even global culture. We also want them to avoid confusion between the work of historical reconstruction and current partisan wrangling.

And yet, I also want to propose that intellectual historians have always been at their most interesting when they, like Arendt, are also unabashedly invested in the present and in the world in which they live as scholars, as citizens, and as private people. Arendt does us the favor of showing us how historians can, perhaps, have their cake and eat it too, looking at the past in a thoroughly historical manner but then routinely attempting to answer, "what does this mean for us?" 28 In the end, this disposition is what makes Arendt modern, even potentially avant-garde, when it comes to history writing—and also a potential model for intellectual historians now.

In our two exemplary essays, and in her body of work more generally, Arendt does not stray from the basic directive that, as historians, our first job is actually to estrange our audience from its and our own present. In this, she could be said to share an agenda with the modernist painter, novelist or critic, who takes his or her job to be showing the current world from an unfamiliar angle and thus reorienting our vision. There are, however, several disciplinarily distinctive ways of going about this process. We historians can accomplish this act of defamiliarization by emphasizing radical discontinuity,

the "otherness" of the past—as when Arendt points out the gap between lying then and lying now. We can also achieve this goal by showing the roots and evolution of our own norms in the specific (as opposed to universal) and the contingent (rather than preordained). Disaggregating assumed pairings—such as truth and democratic politics—and exposing the peculiar conditions that brought these odd bedfellows together at some point in space and time is also a vital part of what historians do. Indeed, the more takenfor-granted the association between the terms is now, the more essential this strategy becomes. By revealing habits of thought that generally go unremarked, the historian inspired by Arendt, much like the Russian Formalists and indeed modernists going back to Voltaire, takes as her project shattering the intellectual complacency of her readers and leading them to perceive, to judge, and, potentially, to adopt new (political) habits of mind themselves.<sup>29</sup> However, if this process of estrangement is successful, the historian is, in a sense, liberated. In the fashion of Arendt, she is freed up to go ahead and take on questions of philosophical import and then to draw general conclusions about how we live in or talk about the world now or even about human nature or social life or political behavior writ large. 30 That is, the historian can engage in the kind of deductive, normative work, albeit of a particular kind, that is generally the exclusive province of philosophers and political theorists.

Some historians practicing today would still insist that I have pushed this argument one step too far. They would argue that this is simply not what historians "do." As Allan Megill writes in an essay on the work of the intellectual historian: "Historians qua historians talk about particular historical situations—however broad they may be. Their remit, qua historians, is not to advance universal claims—unlike most economists and philosophers." This is, of course, a lesson in disciplinary distinction, though Megill claims it is primarily a matter of epistemological "modesty." Other important critics of philosophical history, foremost among them Ian Hunter, complain that the historian working in this mode is compelled to take on the (unappetizing) role of modern sage, assuming epistemic and moral authority over others, including figures in the past. For Hunter, a philosophical approach to history always runs the risk of turning its author into an advocate of ideological politics of one sort or another, and he urges historians to focus their attention on the contextual sources of the intellectual personas behind various ideas precisely in order to avoid this possibility. So

Yet I see no reason why we must choose between exceptionalism, particularism, and contingency, on the one hand, and normative conclusions, including ethical ones, on the other.<sup>33</sup> For Arendt also shows us, very much like Hacking, that sometimes the most important generalizations we can draw are those that challenge other universalizing claims about the world and that we do this by illuminating what those without deep historical sensibilities often fail to notice, including ambiguity, complexity, multiplicity, and patterns of difference and similitude. Concretely, this means that we should be emboldened to ask not only *with* Voltaire and Arendt, "how have lying and politics been related in the past?" or even "how are lying and politics related now?" We might also

ask, in the wake of Voltaire and Arendt, "does either of them get the relative dangers of lying and of truth-telling right?" Or "what are the limits to communication in the public sphere?"

History, like all disciplines, needs rules. It has to have a unique but replicable method for framing and answering questions. But the boundaries of the discipline of history—and indeed the very idea of disciplines as distinctive ways of approaching knowledge—are currently being challenged from both inside and outside the academy.<sup>34</sup> We might respond with a defensive crouch, an insistence on battening down the hatches. Or we can see opportunity. I propose the latter. Just as we need to rethink the story of the emergence of the disciplines in order to recognize their historicity and, thus, precariousness as constructs by which we conduct our intellectual business now, we also need to pay attention to those thinkers who operated in an extramural, extradisciplinary tradition and broke the rules in the past. One place to look is certainly at those much-maligned thinkers who refused any distinction between history and philosophy in defense of the triumph of rationality in eighteenth-century France. They are their own best argument. But even more, I would suggest investigating their descendants, the historians who never stuck to the boundaries of History and the philosophers who largely eschewed the rules of Philosophy as both were practiced in the middle and late-twentieth-century research university. For those of us interested in thinking about thinking—its history and its future—Arendt's essays on lying offer an enormously useful model, one that might help us figure out how to engage in the biggest of conversations and get all of us to rethink what we know to be true.

## NOTES

I. On l'histoire de l'esprit humain as a form of philosophical history, see Donald Kelley, Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 238-44; Haydn Mason, "Optimism, Progress and Philosophical History," in The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought, eds. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 204-10; and esp. Jean Dagen, L'histoire de l'esprit humain dans la pensée française de Fontenelle à Condorcet (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977) and Georges Gusdorf, Les Sciences humaines, I, De l'histoire des sciences à l'histoire de la pensée ([Paris]: Payot, 1966). On the status of history as a form of knowledge in the early modern period, see Donald R. Kelley, History and the Disciplines: The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1977). On earlier advocates and incarnations, see Frank Manuel, The Shapes of Philosophical History (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965).

2. On the establishment of the discipline of history as a historical process unto itself, see Gabriele Lingelbach, "The Institutionalization and Professionalization of History in Europe and the United States," in The Oxford History of Historical Writing, gen. ed. Daniel Woolf, vol. 4: 1800-1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 78-96; Rolf Torstendahl and Irmline Veit-Brause, eds., History-Making: The Intellectual and Social Formation of a Discipline (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1996); and Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity

Question" and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), who notes that "[i]n Europe, and even more in the US, one of the earliest tasks professional historians set for themselves was the emancipation of 'history proper' from nefarious, speculative philosophy of history" (599-600).

- 3. I also use the term to describe my own recent work. See Sophia Rosenfeld, Common Sense: A Political History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), borrowing it from Bruce Mazlish, who gives a slightly different definition in "Philosophical History," Intellectual News 8 (Summer 2000): 117-22. It is more frequently employed by philosophers or political theorists, see, for example, Edward Casey, The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Gary B. Herbert, A Philosophical History of Rights (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002); Ross Hamilton, Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Rémi Brague, The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Grégoire Chamayou, Manhunts: A Philosophical History, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Alin Fumurescu, Compromise: A Political and Philosophical History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Other contemporary scholars who could be said to engage in forms of philosophical history (including consideration of the relationship between historical particulars and philosophical generalizations) without necessarily choosing to label their projects as such include Jacques Rancière, Don Herzog, Pierre Rosanvallon, Charles Taylor, and Ian Hacking.
- 4. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought (New York: Viking, 1968), 227-64, see 228. The essay was originally published in the New Yorker in 1967.
- 5. On Arendt's rejection of the category of "professional thinker" based on her commitment to thinking in relation to action, see "On Hannah Arendt," in Melvyn A. Hill, ed., Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 301-39. For the details of Arendt's biography, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).
- 6. Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," in Crises of the Republic (Mariner Books, 1972), 3-47. This essay originally appeared in 1971 in the New York Review of Books.
  - 7. Young-Bruehl, For the Love of the World, 322.
- 8. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Why Arendt Matters (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,
- 9. Seyla Benhabib, The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 87.
- 10. See Voltaire, The Philosophy of History (London: A. Allcock, 1766), a translation of the 1765 essay that would be added to his Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations in 1769. On Voltaire's historical theory, see Karen O'Brien, Narratives of the Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Pierre Force, "Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History," Modern Intellectual History 6 (November 2009): 457-84. On attention to error in Enlightenment thought, see David Bates, Enlightenment Aberrations: Error and Revolution in France (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

- 11. On Arendt's approach to history, see Benhabib, Reluctant Modernism, esp. 86–95; Richard H. King and Dan Stone, eds., Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); George Cotkin, "Illuminating Evil: Hannah Arendt and Moral History," Modern Intellectual History 4 (November 2007): 463-90; and Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arends on Ethics and Politics (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).
- 12. On Tocqueville as a model philosophical historian, see James T. Kloppenberg, "The Canvas and the Color: Tocqueville's 'Philosophical History' and Why It Matters Now," Modern Intellectual History 3 (November 2006): 495-521.
- 13. Arendt, The Human Condition, 2nd ed. (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1998), 5.
- 14. Intellectual historians have not been in the vanguard among practitioners of global or world history, but on the current vogue, see Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., Global Intellectual History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 15. See the different proposal of David Armitage, "What's the Big Idea: Intellectual History and the Longue Durée," History of European Ideas 38 (December 2012): 493-507.
  - 16. Arendt, The Life of the Mind (1978; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 212.
- 17. Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," New Literary History 42 (Autumn 2011): 573-91, an argument not about Arendt but against treating texts as belonging to particular slices of history that are themselves self-sustaining systems, hermetically sealed from one another.
- 18. On the idea of "revolutions of the human mind," see Dagen, L'histoire de l'esprit humain, or very briefly, Jonathan Israel, Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 357.
  - 19. Benhabib, Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt, 193.
- 20. Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991 [1962]).
- 21. For an introduction to the idea of "historical epistemology," see the pioneering article by Lorraine Daston, "The Moral Economy of Science," Osiris, 2nd ser., 10 (1995): 3-24. The term (and approach) has by now been adopted by scholars ranging from Mary Poovey to Arnold Davidson to Steven Shapin.
- 22. For an important exception, see Ian Hacking, "The Suicide Weapon," Critical Inquiry 35 (August 2008): 1-32, in which Hacking tries to historicize how suicide is both thought about and done so that it becomes a political (countermilitary) act. On his larger project, see his Historical Ontology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- 23. Defenses of democracy on epistemic rather than moral grounds include Robert Westbrook, Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy," Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology 3 (June 2006): 8-22; Robert Talisse, A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy (New York: Routledge, 2007); and David Estlund, Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 24. Some scholars still mistakenly insist on seeing Arendt's historical and philosophical commitments as distinct, arguing that there were really two Arendts, one a historically oriented theorist of political thought and culture, the other a pure political theorist or phenomenologist of political speech and action. On the problematic status of this interpretation, see the introduction to King and Stone, Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History.

- 25. On Voltaire's desire to write for a philosophically inclined but general reader, see Guido Abbattista, "The Historical Thought of the French Philosophes," in The Oxford History of History Writing, vol. 3, 1400-1800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 406-27.
- 26. See, in addition to Benhabib, Reluctant Modernism, Kirstie M. McClure, "The Odor of Judgment: Exemplarity, Propriety and Politics in the Company of Hannah Arendt," in Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics, ed. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 53-84, where Arendt's reliance on judgments derived from historical examples is described as "anything but modern" (54); and Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 132, where Arendt's antimodernism is demonstrated by her relationship to narrative and plot.
- 27. See "'I Am a Philosopher of the Particular Case': An Interview with the 2009 Holberg Prizewinner Ian Hacking," History of the Human Sciences 26 (July 2013): 32-51. Hacking emphasizes that his "dynamic nominalism" depends on "mak[ing] philosophy by making use of the past" in all its particularity.
- 28. On presentism and history writing, see David Hull, "In Defense of Presentism," History and Theory 18 (1979): 1-15; and Peter Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas," in Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History, ed. Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-55. On "presence"—or how the past presses into the present—as a current preoccupation in many disciplines, including history, see Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg, eds., Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
- 29. On the Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky's parallel vision of art's task as defamiliarization—or the act of making strange (ostranenie) that which seems most natural and immutable—in an effort at a renewal of perception and ultimately political change, see Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 50-58. As Jameson points out, in an interesting parallel, this approach can be traced back to French Enlightenment writers' use of fictitious Indians and Persians to point out the absurdities of French social life from an outsider's perspective.
- 30. On the status of moral judgments in history writing now, see Richard Vann, "Historians and Moral Evaluations," History and Theory 43 (December 2004): 3-30. There is, however, a strong argument to be made that the moralizing project of the eighteenth century was never really severed by "professional" history—and that this is especially true among American historians, who have made race, class, and gender central foci in recent decades.
- 31. Allan Megill, "Five Questions on Intellectual History," Rethinking History 15, no. 4 (2011): 489-510, see 492. See, too, Quentin Skinner, Liberty before Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), who similarly says the job of historians is "to provide their readers with information relevant to the making of judgments about their current values and beliefs and then leave them to ruminate" without having passed any public judgments oneself.
- 32. Ian Hunter, "The History of Philosophy and the Persona of the Philosopher," Modern Intellectual History 4 (November 2007): 571-600; and Ian Hunter, "The State of History and the Empire of Metaphysics," History and Theory 44 (May 2005): 289-303. On Hunter's critique, see, too, Knud Haakonssen, "The Philosophy of a Persona," History of European Ideas 40 (January 2014): 1-6. Hunter also rejects the arguments for reconciliation,

prevalent in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), between those interested in treating the history of philosophy empirically and those who see the history of philosophy as ing the history of philosophy empirically and those who see the history of philosophy reason's reflection on itself. For newer approaches to the relationship between philosophy and history, see the chapters by Margaret Abruzzo, Samuel Moyn, and Joel Isaac in the present volume.

33. Here we come quite close to another important argument made in the 1960s by an American historian, Hayden White, who did not quite see himself as belonging to the profession. White famously advocated in "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 132, for a return to the days when history was a "moral science" whose task was "less to remind men of their obligation to the past than to force upon them an awareness of how the past could be used to effect an ethically responsible transition from present to future." See Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 599.

34. For a level-headed assessment of the benefits and detriments of the disciplines, including the long history of suspicion of their function even as they endure, see the introduction to *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

PART IV
Secularization