

The Paradox of the Lie

(1939-***)

“Your father the devil..., when he speaketh
a lie, he speaketh of his own, for he is a liar
and the father of lies” Jn. 8: 44.

“Il y toujours quelque mensonge dans l’order.
Le mensonge est une systemisation qui
recouvre une disharmonie.”

“Un Mensonge est la racine de l’existence en
tant qu’elle suppose la discordance utilisie
au profit de la systemisation”

*Fl. Poulhan. “Le mensonge du monde”.**

The lie plays a tremendous role in human life. The world is swallowed up in lies. And to the problem of the lie philosophers have paid too little attention. Not only do people that are by nature liars lie, but also uprightly truthful people. They lie not only consciously, but also without awareness. People live in fear, and the lie is a weapon of defense. The structure of consciousness is deformed by the function of lie, begotten by fear. There exist several types of lies, but the most interesting is that type of lie, which is conceived of not as a sin or a vice, but as a duty. Elementary in type is the greedy lie, as the means for the attainment of egoistical aims. But there is a type of lie, non-greedy, almost artistic, when man does not make a distinction between reality and his own fictitious inventions. This type likewise does not here interest me. There is moreover a type of lie out of sympathy, which can be to the saving of the life of another man. Uprightness does not signify formalism and pedanticism. The moral act of man is always creatively-individual and is worked for the concrete instances of life, singular and irrepeatable. But most significant is the social lie, affirmed of as a duty. The life of states and societies is full of it, it serves as a support for civilisation, this gives it pride, as being the vanguard against chaos and anarchy.

Deeply rooted in the mass consciousness, myths are manifest by the expression of this lie. Through the organising of these myths, lie runs the world, a watch-guard over human society. Ancient myths arose out of a collective subconscious creativity,

and at their foundation was always some sort of reality. Contemporary myths are characteristically and consciously an organised lie. In them is no naivete. This may sound pessimistic, but it must needs be recognised, that *lie is mortared into the foundation of the organisation of society*. The pure and nakedly unshielded truth can lead to the end of all things, to the ruin of societies and states, -- say the defenders of the pragmatism of the lie. Politics is to a remarkable degree an art of directing the human masses, i.e. to spout demagoguery, i.e. to spout the lie. This artifice is utilised by myths, which are no chance product of fantasy, and which bear a consciously organising character. Myth is created simultaneously about the object of love and the object of hate, and in it powerful emotions reach great intensity and concreteness. Eros and anti-eros simultaneously evoke a work of enflamed fantasy, that of a created image. The lie, avowedly socially-useful, herein reaches within the myth such unprecedented proportions and so deforms the consciousness, that there arises the question of a radical change of attitude towards truth and the falsehood of lie, -- *about the disappearance of the very criterion of truth*. In earlier times, lie played a small role in political life. Though in diplomacy they have always resorted to cunning and slyness. With the beginning of the modern period, Machiavellianism came into Europe as a system for the running of states. But all the same, lie does not recognise ultimately the higher principle of life, in its striving towards expansion and might. The change of attitude towards truth was there already with Nietzsche, with Marx, and in pragmatic philosophy. Nietzsche indeed said, that truth is begotten of the will to power. Marx taught, that the consciousness of truth is inseparably bound up with the revolutionary class struggle and there cannot be truth cut off apart from this class struggle. Pragmatic philosophy affirms, that truth is the useful and the fruitfull for the process of life. In such manner, truth is entirely made subordinate to the vital process, and its criterion is the increase of the might in life. And in practise it leads to this, that *they cease to seek truth, they instead seek power*. But for the finding of power, the lie can seem more fruitful than truth. They seek power because they sense themselves perishing in the world, *which has gone into a fluid condition, in which there is no longer a firmness of body*. I remember, how at a certain international gathering in Germany, shortly before Hitler came to power, there was read a report about the mindsets of German students, and the basic thought of this report was, that the students should cease to seek truth and instead seek power. Thence the extraordinary role of technology in modern life.

The lie is the chief foundation of the so-called totalitarian states, and without an organising lie they could never have been created. The lie is conceived of, as a sacred duty, a duty in regard to the chosen race, in regard to the might of the state, in regard to the chosen class. It is not regard as a lie -- that which intensifies dynamism, that which serves to the growth of life, that which gives strength to the struggle. *The lie can even seem the sole truth*. The "cunning of reason", about which Hegel speaks,

renders itself in conscious practise as the useful lie. With Hegel there was already the danger of the relativisation of truth, subordinating it to the relativity of history. The lie, which on a tremendous scale is practised in Soviet Russia and which receives monstrous expression in the Moscow processes with the old communists, is *a dialectical lie*. The lie appears at a certain dialectical moment in the realisation of the perfect Communist society. Each moment of the dialectical process relativises the ultimate triumph of logic in this process: for example, the old communist, faithful to the Communist idea, is transformed into a fascist, and the preceding moment of this process is completely negated, but this is avowedly necessary for the realisation of the aims of the given process, etc. The lie within Fascism and National Socialism bears not a dialectic, but rather a vital-dynamic character. The preaching of an exterminative hatred towards the Jews and the Marxists is necessary for the intensification of dynamism, for the growth of vital power. Everything, which is said about a racial or class enemy, is usually a lie. *The enemy is a fiction, needful for a drumming up of enthusiasm, for the justifying of force, for the increase of might*. The fronts, which are put together in the world, are pervaded by lie. The so-called anti-Communist front is a lie and a fraud. In Germany this is simply international politics and veiled wishes for the carving up of Russia. In general this is but a concentration of greedy capitalistic and fascist powers. But the anti-Fascist front, despite the existence of a real danger of Fascism throughout all the world, likewise has lodged within it a lie, since as fascists they label everyone who is anti-Communist, which certainly is untrue. Many an adherent of capitalism is a liberal, but not a fascist. Fascism liquidates private capital and replaces it by the state. The lie shews itself by putting the world into two camps, and this is an invitation for war. In actuality the world is quite more complex, it does not consist merely of fascists and communists. Upon the lie likewise is the basis for the political parties. Demagoguery, without which the parties cannot circulate, always presupposes the lie. The slogans, which the parties drag out during the time of pre-election agitations, usually have nothing in common with their real politics. *And with all the lofty aims, there is a veiling-over of non-lofty interests*.

From a most profound truly backwards point of view there is what pragmatic philosophy propounds, which is the affirming of every theory, subordinating truth to the organic vital process. On strong grounds it can be asserted, that the lie is useful for military life and the organisation of power in this world. Truth, the pure and unsought for truth, can be harmful and destructive for the organisation of order, for every systematic cover up of disharmony. This, essentially, is said by Poulhan, -- a singular thinker, turning serious attention to the problem of evil. With this is connected a profound tragedy within the fate of Christianity. Dostoevsky with genius revealed in his "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" not only the dialectic of freedom and authority, but also the dialectic of truth and lie within the organisation of the kingdom of this world, within the organisation of the Church and the state. The truth, revealed by

Christ, is the truth about an infinite freedom of spirit. The Grand Inquisitor, through the lips of whom essentially speak all those wanting to organise the world order, acknowledged the truth of Christ as being destructive and anarchic, and for the organisation of the well-being of people he wanted to straighten out the deed of Christ. The argument of the Grand Inquisitor is almost literally repeated by Charles Morras, who regarded the Gospel as a book destructive and anarchic, but who praises the Catholic Church for this, that it knew how to transform the destructive and anarchic book into power, an organising of order, i.e. “to straighten out the deed of Christ”. It would be to the utmost degree unjust to write off the “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” as exclusively applicable only to Catholicism. *The whole of historical Christianity knew how to transform Christian truth, which is an apocalyptic explosion of the world, into a power, adaptable to this world, to the vital interests of this world.* A thousand times over people have affirmed, that the world should be saved by lie and only by lie, that *truth is dangerous for the very existence of the world.* And all ever again and again is put before people the question: should it be so, is it permissible that the world should be saved by lie? *Can one give oneself over to the service of truth and risk the existence of the world? And this would mean, is it possible in the name of truth to risk perishing?* The lie can sustain the organisation of society and the state. But inwardly it is ruinous to the person. Truth however builds up the person.

Dostoevsky has posed a profound problem. But otherwise, the problem was put just as radically by L. Tolstoy, a very truthful writer of world literature. The whole creativity of L. Tolstoy was directed against the lie, it is a marvelous unmasking of the lie, upon which rests civilisation, the state, and the organisation of society. In essence, *L. Tolstoy puts forth everything to risk, puts everything into the picture.* The core of Tolstoy’s teaching about non-resistance consists in this, that when man ceases to oppose evil by force, then God Himself begins to act, there comes into its own right the Divine nature. There is nothing easier, than to criticise the teachings of L. Tolstoy. It is very easy to demonstrate, that amidst non-resistance evil always conquers. But Tolstoy trusted on an historical miracle and in the name of faith in this *miracle of a direct intervention by God* he sets forth to risk the perishing of society, the state and civilisation, the perishing of the world, which is sustained on lie and coercion, upon law, contrary to the law of God. Christians wanted to arrange their affairs in any case, such that matters would go fine even if God were not. *L. Tolstoy demands first of all the renouncing of the socially useful lie.* With this is connected the extraordinary love of truth in his literary creativity. Man ought first of all to stop lying before himself and before God, to cease hiding himself from the truth, which can cause suffering, which is not flattering to man, and sometimes even threatens him outright. The love for truth is a fundamental virtue and the world has great need for it. *The world is so caught up in lies, that it has lost the criterion of truth.* Man ceases to distinguish reality from the

products of the imagination, begotten from the bosom of the subconscious, from myths, imbued with vital and social utility. The creative imagination can be a pathway to the knowledge of truth. But very often and suspiciously the workings of the imagination are socially advantageous and useful, helpful to exterminate the enemy, and justifying force.

Science loves truth and seeks truth, it will not endure a lie. Such are its principles. In this is the greatness of science. Genuine teaching -- is ascetic. But even scientific theories, the unmasking of the illusions and falsehood of the subconscious (for example, Freud and psychoanalysis), can themselves create myths, very remote from reality. Thus, Freud created a genuine myth about the universal significance of the Oedipus complex, by which to explain the active arising of human societies. He appears here not as interpreter of the myth, but as the creator of the myth. It is of interest, that the creative imagination of Freud here acts not in directions, useful for the vital process, but in directions very pessimistic. The philosophy of Freud itself is so feeble (I speak not about his great scientific merits), that it cannot give basis nor justify his love for truth, in unmasking the lie of the consciousness. A certain French surrealist fashioned from Freud this conclusion, that it is necessary to kill the father and appeals for this murder. Freud is tempted not by an optimistic, but by a pessimistic myth. Science is inclined to deny religious realities as being mythic, begotten of the collective unconscious. But it created *a myth about science, as an universal knowing*, for resolving all questions. Science itself loves truth, but scientism is a lie. The learned in solid rank practise the lie, useful and advantageous for their scientific pride. The modern novel reveals very bitter truths about man (Proust, A. Zhid, Lavrenev, the novel of psychological analysis). The literature, essentially, speaks about the disassociation of person, about the loss of the personal centre. Disassociation of person also begets the lie. But the most wondrous creativity proves compromised in this process of the decomposition of person. The keen discernment of reality is an act of integral person-ness, and it is necessary for truthfulness. The growing increase of lying is a process both social and a process individual-psychological.

In what is the cause of the exceptional role of lying in our epoch? *This is connected with a change in the structure of consciousness.* The extraordinary increase of lying in the world and of the justified lie, not considered a vice, is determined first of all by an *exteriorising of the conscience*. When the conscience, producing moral judgements, is carried over from the depths of person to the collectives and in the dynamic of the collectives into history, then how readily the lie can seem justified. But even in the past the lie was justified not by the personal conscience, but by the conscience of the collective, by a conscience that is national, churchly, state, military, class, party, etc. But never yet in such proportions has there occurred *the withdrawal*

of conscience from the depths of person and its transference to collective realities, as in our time. The personal conscience, the personal moral judgement not only are paralysed, but they demand of them that they be paralysed. The personal conscience would never recourse to suchlike a lie, to which recurses the conscience of the state, the nation, the party, the class, etc. In the name of the interests of the German race or of the proletariat can be permitted the grand and organised lie, which would nauseate the personal conscience of the individual German national-socialist or Russian communist. *The denigration of the structure of consciousness is explicable in this, that for the individual consciousness there is denied the right furthermore to define the realities and distinguish them from the fictitious, and this right is acknowledged only but for the collective consciousness.* That which for the individual consciousness appears a lie, for the collective consciousness is manifest as a reality, even though it be contradicted by the clearest of evidence. To everyone, for example, it is clear and evident, that the democratic states do not want war and are of a pacifist mood. But for the collective consciousness of Germany and Italy it is clear and evident, that in particular it is the democratic states that want war, and it is the dictators however that do not want war and struggle for peace. This is a lie from the point of view of the personal consciousness and conscience. But this lie is transformed into a reality from the point of view of the collective fascist consciousness, since it furthers the might of the dictators. For the personal consciousness and conscience it is clear, that in the USSR the executed old communists were die-hard communists to the end, and not fascists and not spies. But for the collective consciousness of the general line of the Communist party, the lie about the old communists is a reality, necessary in the dialectical struggle.

The lie of the contemporary world is not a lie in the subjective sense, *in the sense of the sin of the subject*, this lie is the expression of a profound degeneration of the structure of consciousness. *From the world ever moreso disappears the personal conscience and all the less is heard its voice.* But this does not mean, that in general conscience vanishes, it but alters its character. The collective consciousness has crystallised with such power and in such proportions, that it completely smothers within man the personal conscience. *Man is forced into the lie in the name of this or some other understanding of the collective welfare.* The lie to a remarkable degree is the manifestation of the social order. Man lies primarily to an other and to others. And even when man lies to himself, then he does this, having others in view both consciously and unconsciously. Man plays out a role before himself, so as then later to play out this role before others. The dictator is always a man inwardly an incorrigible liar, but this lying defines his role afront the world. The social attitudes of people are filled not only by the evil lie, begotten of the will to power, but also by the innocent conditional lie. The innocent conditional lie can be the condition for the possibility of human living-together. Thus, for example, a man might polite with another man,

whom he despises to the bottom of his soul. The lie is wrought by evil, when there is the will towards domination and might, not personal only, but collective also, in what it cannot realise of itself. The will to power can be particular to an individual, but it always bears a social character. The “super man” of Nietzsche unfailingly must find himself in social acts. But these social acts unfailingly demand the lie. The will to power cannot be realised otherwise, than with the assist of the lie. Christ spoke with power, and in Him only was the pure truth. Caesar, the dictator, can find power only with the help of the lie. *Without the lie can be realised only the feeling of freedom.* Freedom is a principle, contrary to lie. And the authentic liberation of man is a liberation from the domination of the lie. The extent of the lie in the world defines itself by the manifestation of a centralising collective consciousness, sustaining the will to power. *To this ought to be opposed the heroic struggle for the freedom of the spirit, i.e. for the truth, the unmasked lie.* Not at all does this mean individualism. Man is a communitarian being. The struggle cannot be directed against the creation of a new society, of a new communality of people. *But truth always means, that spirit defines society, whereas the lie signifies, that society defines spirit.* The new society cannot be created by diplomacy, i.e. by adaption to the condition of the world. The world is so full of the lie, the lie is so corrosive to the supreme human ideas, that by the unique powers of the world, by which everything is relativised, it is impossible to conquer the lie. *Faith in the victory over the lie presupposes faith in the existence of a power exalted above the world, of the power of a Truth over the world, i.e. God.* Even if all the world be infected by the lie, then all the same there is the Truth, pure from every blemish of lie, and in the struggle against the lie we ought to unite with this Truth. The personal conscience defines our relationship to this utmost Power -- the Truth, but this is not only a conscience, isolated from other people, this is a conscience, pervaded by the sense of the spiritual brotherhood of people, a brotherhood in the Truth, and not in the lie.

Nikolai Berdyaev

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N.B. This is an article missed by the authoritative 1972 YMCA Press Tamara Klepinine Berdiaev Bibliographie. Circumstances surrounding the “rediscovery” of this article and its Online republishing by A. N. Bogoslovsky remain unexplained, as noted by Y Krotov in his Online citation and Russian posting of the article. The A. N.

Bogoslovsky Online Russian posting of this article further indicates that its “orthography ... was reset corresponding with current norms of the Russian language”, apparently with some typographic errors, as in initial citation of name “Paulhan-Poulhon”.

* “In the love for order is always present a moment of the lie. The lie -- is an unique kind of systemisation, which regulates disharmony.”

“The lie is rooted in existence itself such that it presupposes discord utilised to the profit of systemisation”.

Fl. Poulhan. “The Lie of the World”.

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