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Article

Do Politics Repel Truth? Hannah Arendt on Political Controversies in Dialogue with Plato

Marie-Josée Lavallée *

This article uncovers Hannah Arendt's debt to Plato's work in her analyses of political controversies of her time, as Nazi propaganda and state lies on American involvement in the Vietnam War, and her assessment of the failure of the French Revolution. While her relation to Plato's oeuvre when she tackles political issues most often took the form of a stormy and one-sided dialogue resembling a monologue, her treatment of these controversies shows that Arendt had at times an authentic, open, and fruitful dialogue with the Greek philosopher. To make sense of these phenomena and events, she uses a range of concepts and philosophical motives first developed through her account of the antagonism between the philosopher and the polis and draws from Plato's discussions of the relations between truth and opinion. Uncovering this crucial source of Arendt's thinking allows a more nuanced and perceptive grasp of her political thought.

Many of the greatest names of German philosophy from the end of the 18th century have revisited the Ancient's wisdom. They developed their thinking through a dialectical relation with Ancient Greek philosophy, oscillating between appropriation and refutation. This dialogue with the Ancients encompassed metaphysics, aesthetics, logic, epistemology, as well as ethical and political issues. Since, for many contemporaries, the

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20th-century world wars not only caused a historical break but also cut the thread of the Western tradition of thought, pretending that the Greeks can still have something to teach sounds at best counterintuitive. And yet, thinkers like Hannah Arendt believe that “the end of tradition does not necessarily mean that traditional concepts have lost their power over the minds of men” (Arendt 2006a: 26). It is precisely at this historical turning point that Arendt started an intensive dialogue with the Ancient Greeks in her effort to understand the challenges of her own time. Her undertaking had a negative and a positive side: first, identifying and critically examining concepts and experiences carried by the Western tradition of thought—especially metaphysics—which, according to her, contributed to a devaluation of the political (Arendt 2006a: 26; 1978: 212) that culminated in totalitarianism. On the other hand, searching the past to discover fruitful sources which can inspire the post-Holocaust’s urgent political and ethical renewal. This enterprise of deconstruction—reconstruction dragged her toward Plato’s dialogues.

Hannah Arendt’s relationship to Ancient Greece surfaces throughout her work. Its influence on the development of her thought has been acknowledged early on (Dolan 2005; Euben 2005; Havers 2004; Marshall 2010; McCarthy 2012; O’Sullivan 1975; Taminiaux 2005; Tsao 2002; Wolin 1983), primarily based on *The Human Condition*, her “most Greek work.” Most studies deal with her relationship with Greek thought and the Greek polis in general: under Arendt’s pen, the latter becomes an idealized public space that can redeem politics in the aftermath of the Holocaust (Dietz 2005: 92–93). When commentators focus on a single author or corpus, it is Aristotle who mainly attracts attention due to his dense presence in Arendtian political work (Backman 2010; Gregorio 2004; Lefebvre 2001; Knight 2008; Villa 1995). She claims inspiration from Aristotle for key concepts of her political thought, like action, plurality, freedom, and friendship. By contrast, Plato looks like a fugitive figure in her writings. A handful of studies have considered aspects of this relationship (Abensour 2007; Beatty 1994; Lavallée 2018; Sallis 2004; Taminiaux 1998; Vallée 1999; Villa 1995; 1999a; 1999b).¹ The short and often repetitive references to the latter in Arendt’s major work are nothing but the tip of the iceberg. These fragments are often the only visible traces of an intensive and sustained dialogue disclosed the reader discovers in posthumously published essays and work notes, like the notebooks published under the title *Denktagebuch*. Plato is omnipresent in the latter, while there are very few references to Aristotle. Besides revealing the full importance of Plato for the Arendtian conceptualization of the political, these materials

allow one to restore the complex threads of thought underlying punctual discussions of Plato that may seem decontextualized and even superficial, thus allowing a deeper understanding of crucial ramifications of Arendt's thinking.

Indeed, while Plato was no less important than Aristotle for the crafting of her conception of the political, her dialogue with the former on this topic was mainly stormy and one-sided, looking like a monologue. It is none other than Plato who Arendt holds responsible for the decline and forgetting of authentic politics throughout Western thought. She believes that the merciless condemnation of politics she attributes to him was the source of a very old contempt for politics which progressively paved the way to totalitarianism (Lavallée 2016; 2018). Plato would have shaped the political according to categories and thought patterns fiercely opposed to political action, plurality, and freedom (Arendt 2006: 17–18). Arendt's struggle with the conception of the political she assigns to Plato profoundly shaped her own vision of what the political should be, which she developed in counterpoint to the latter.

Given her depiction of Plato as the enemy of politics and democracy, one hardly expects to find a fruitful dialogue with his work in Arendt's developments on politics, by contrast with her discussion of ethical issues like conscience and evil (Lavallée 2019). This article will scrutinize her assessment of the problem of lie in politics, and the role of opinion and ideology, which guide her analysis of Nazi propaganda, the issue of state lie in the United States of the 1960s, and her account of the French Revolution. Arendt's assessment of these phenomena in these contexts presents many puzzling and idiomatic elements. As we will show, these discussions draw from a highly consistent and carefully crafted theoretical background. The latter becomes fully intelligible only when one goes back to their intellectual source, namely, Plato's work. And yet, the Arendtian writings dedicated to these problems of modern politics do not deal—or only minimally—with Ancient Greece.

When Arendt tries to understand “In Truth and Politics” why politics seem to preclude truth (2006c: 227–29), she found support in dialogues like the *Apology of Socrates*, the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*. She thus sets the tone:

The story of the conflict between truth and politics is an old and complicated one, and nothing would be gained by simplification or moral denunciation. Throughout history, the truth-seekers and truth-tellers have

been aware of the risks of their business; as long as they did not interfere with the course of the world, they were covered with ridicule, but he who forced his fellow-citizens to take him seriously by trying to set them free from falsehood and illusion was in danger of his life : “If they could lay hands on [such a] man... they would kill him,” Plato says in the last sentence of the cave allegory. (Arendt 2006c: 229)

We will bring into light the Platonic insights that informed Arendt’s discussions of truth, lies, and ideology in the essays “Truth and Politics,” “Lying in Politics. Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay on Understanding,” “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report From Germany” and in the book *On Revolution*. As a first step, we will detail the ancient background of these reflections and identify influential Platonic concepts based on Arendt’s writings and the Platonic dialogues that inspired her. Confrontation of both corpus is essential to grasp how Arendt reinterprets, transforms, and recontextualizes her sources to suit her theoretical needs because, as Jerome Kohn (1990: 106) points out, she has read Plato with a lot of imagination. Nonetheless, Arendt’s commentators do not routinely compare her interpretations of Greek philosophy with the original texts (Beatty 1994 and Demont 2001; McCarthy 2012; Sallis 2004).² We will then be able to clarify her reflections on truth, lies, and ideology in modern politics by connecting them with the Platonic concepts and discussions that informed them.

Thus doing, the article will show that Arendt, in certain circumstances, has an authentic, open dialogue with Plato, who she otherwise depicts as a gravedigger of politics. This dialogue shapes her understanding and analysis of modern political controversies in many ways. More broadly, exposing part of what is going on behind the curtain, in Arendt’s philosophical workshop, contributes to a more nuanced and perceptive grasp of her political thought.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TRUTH AND POLITICS: THE ANCIENT ROOTS

In an essay almost forgotten today, “Lying in Politics. Reflections on the Pentagon Papers” (1971), Arendt deals with the scandal unleashed by the public unveiling of the “Pentagon Papers.” These documents reveal that the U.S. government heavily relied on lies and manipulation of the public opinion regarding American interventions in Vietnam between the Second World War and May 1968 and matters of domestic politics. Arendt starts her

reflection by reminding the common wisdom that lies have always been held as ordinary power tools for the politician, the demagogue, and the statesman (Arendt 1972a: 4–5; 2006c: 227). Then, intending to clarify this belief by recovering its origins, Arendt borrows a Platonic theoretical framework. The antagonism between truth and politics ultimately goes back to the Cave allegory, she explains. More specifically, “it arose out of two diametrically opposed ways of life—the life of the philosopher, as interpreted first by Parmenides and then by Plato, and the way of life of the citizen” (2006c: 232–33): this conflict is not settled yet (2006c: 236).

“The gulf between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion,” states Arendt in “Philosophy and Politics” (1990: 73). In this posthumously published essay devoted to Plato, she develops crucial philosophical motives and concepts surfacing in her later political and ethical writings.³ Arendt made “philosophy” synonymous with the kind of doctrinal and systematic thinking she attributes to Plato. Arendt’s Socrates, by contrast, embodies the critical thinking she promoted throughout her work. While she sometimes transgressed her own dichotomy, the contrast she draws between Plato, “the philosopher” and Socrates, the “thinker *par excellence*,” remains operative in her last book, *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978: 166–93). But this distinction is artificial because her Socrates is mainly Plato’s Socrates, and being a Platonic character, it is not always possible to distinguish them with certainty (Lavallée 2018; 2019). Arendt, incidentally, sometimes tries to isolate Socrates’ voice in dialogues in which he does not appear. To her, “philosophy” refers to a unique and transcendent truth, alien to and remote from human experience. By contrast, she associates to Socrates another variety of truth, which springs from pluralistic and norm-free thinking: it is a truth pertaining to human affairs and corresponding to *doxa*. According to Arendt, *doxa* is the very stuff of politics. She explains that while Socrates tried to make philosophy useful to politics, Plato made them antagonistic. His master’s condemnation and death convinced him of the intrinsic danger of opinion: thus, he tried to protect philosophy from the arbitrariness of politics at all costs. Therefore, Plato condemned *doxa* and claimed rulership for the philosopher (Arendt 1990: 73–77, 9, 83, 91):

To the citizen's everlasting opinions about human affairs, which themselves were in a state of constant flux, the philosopher opposed the truth about those things which in their very nature were everlasting and from which, therefore, principles could be derived to stabilize human affairs. Hence the opposite of truth was mere opinion, which was equated with illusion, and it was this degrading of opinion that gave the conflict its political poignancy; for opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power. (Arendt, 2006c: 233)

The fact that Plato opposes truth to *doxa* in his dialogues is beyond discussion. But Arendt bases her demonstration on a terminology borrowed from the *Apology of Socrates* and the *Gorgias*, dialogues to which she seldom refers to in her writings but commented in the *Denktagebuch*. In "Philosophy and Politics," she states that Socrates' failure to convince his judges "of his innocence and merits" has convinced Plato of the fundamental incompatibility between *dialegesthai* and *peithein* (1990: 73). Using these terms anew in "Truth and Politics," she specifies that the conflict between truth and opinion corresponds to the difference between communicating in the form of dialogue and rhetorical speech (2006c: 233), which is one-sided. *Dialegesthai* describes the philosophical discourse between two partners, while *peithein* is a mode of speech suited to public speech, and used in political discourse and rhetoric. *Peithein* relies on opinion (1990: 73–4, 9), while *dialegesthai* points toward truth. While Socrates himself never thought of *dialegesthai* and *peithein* as opposites, and he made the first synonymous with midwifery (1990: 80–1). These two words are essential to Arendt's reflection: her explanation of the reasons for Socrates' condemnation and, by extension, for the contempt for politics which would have pervaded Plato's political thought is based on the contrast she draws between these concepts. She also goes back to them when expounding the reasons for the endurance of the antagonism of truth and politics throughout the centuries.

Socrates was condemned because he expressed himself through *dialegesthai*. One cannot persuade with truth, which asserts itself through coercion, explained Arendt times and again (Arendt 1990: 78–80; 2006b: 107–8; 2006c: 239, 241; 2006e: 185–86, 96). Moreover, discovered in contemplation and solitude, truth is not only alien but opposed to human affairs (1990: 79, 97, 101; 2006c: 247). This conviction is indebted to Martin Heidegger's reading of the Cave allegory. According to him, Plato, in the Allegory, substitutes to the prevailing conception of truth as *aletheia*, truth as *orthotès*. He invokes,

as a proof of this change the sudden occurrence in Plato's work of a terminology related to vision (Heidegger 1990: 143, 146, 153). Arendt's conception of *doxa*—which will be treated below—which is closely tied to appearing, shows many affinities with *aletheia*, the first type of truth Heidegger describes, while her definition of philosophical truth is compatible with truth as *orthotès*⁴ (Arendt 2006b: 291, note 16; Abensour 2007: 974–75). The latter consists in a relation of conformity which ties everything to its corresponding *eidos* or *idea* (Heidegger 1990: 146, 153) and thus, which imposes itself over the sensible world. *Aletheia*, by contrast, refers to the occultation that dominated the essence of being: truth is disclosure, namely, what was torn out of occultation (Heidegger 1990: 143). The influence of Heidegger's connection between truth and vision also surfaces through Arendt's remark that the philosopher, who discovers truth through contemplation, is unable to communicate it to his fellow citizens when he returns to the Cave. She deduces from this part of the Allegory that truth resists to speech (Arendt 1990: 97–100; 1998: 20; 2006a: 25; 2006b: 114–15; 2006d: 46–47.⁵

In Arendt's account of Socrates' trial, Plato, who reacted to his master's death by denouncing *peithein* as deceptive, repudiated *doxa* and plurality (1990: 73–74, 9–81). Here, let us emphasize that to her, individuality must not be sacrificed for the sake of community (Arendt 1998: 175–76, 80). In the Arendtian vision of politics, the individual is embedded in a web of relationships that constitutes the “world,” and the public sphere offers to each one the opportunity to speak and act freely. As a consequence, rejecting this characteristic of politics, as Plato did in Arendt's narrative, amounts to negating the uniqueness of each individual. Opinions or *doxai* express the way truth opens up to each one, conveying the individual's perspective on things and the world, that is, his *dokei moi*. This expression, recurrent in her early essay devoted to Plato, surfaces again in “Truth and Politics,” which mainly focuses on modern politics (1990: 80–81; 2006c: 237; 2005: 391–92). *Doxa*, which also means splendor and fame, naturally belongs to the public realm (1990: 80), where everyone has the opportunity to show himself, explains Arendt. *Thaumazein*,⁶ contemplation, is the antithesis of *doxazein*, which is specifically political (1990: 97, 99). Through the contrast between *doxa*, which is plural, and philosophical truth, which is one and aloof from human experience, and “speechless,” Arendt turns Plato's political thought into the perfect counterpoint of her own vision of politics (1990: 80, 88, 99–100).⁷ Plato wished to place politics under the tutelage of philosophical truth and of “one-man rule.”

she holds. His proposition to turn philosophers into kings would be a powerful example of this ambition (1990: 221).

Obviously, Arendt does not hold that truth is fatally antagonistic to politics, for she puts forward a conception of truth differing from philosophical truth. Connected to Socrates's activity, it is neither alien nor antagonistic to human experience. Arendtian truth reveals itself through *doxa*, more specifically, through maieutics (Arendt 1990: 80–81, 5; 2006e: 219). Arendt was not unaware of the risk associated with Socrates' examinations, namely, being left without any *doxa* at all, a state which exposes the corruptible individual to corruption (1990: 90–91). Drawing from her reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, she connects Socrates' maieutics to *philia politikè* (1990: 83–85). Truth is discovered through conversations and exchanges with one's peers in the polis. Indeed, Arendtian truth discloses itself through dialogue, while philosophical truth, which Plato embodies, imposes itself, thus making the dialogue impossible. However, Arendt's acknowledgment that opinions must be examined to uncover the truth they contain sounds like a concession that they can be wrong. Here, her position meets Plato's distrust of opinion.

In the *Denktagebuch*, she quotes an excerpt of the *Sophist* (231) where the sophist is described as a purger of souls whose task is to remove opinions obstructing learning (Arendt 2005: 513). Her Socrates, indeed, displays close affinities with the latter (2005: 515; Dolan 2005; Cassin 1996: 29, 34). As Barbara Cassin observes, Arendt's Socrates is a sophist who turns thinking into judging through the liberating effect of critique, a critique connected to the requirement of conformity with oneself (Cassin 1996: 34). His unusual kind of dialectics, which is understood as an exchange of opinions, is in fact the sophistic *dokei moi* (Cassin 1992: 147). Also, while it pleases Arendt to depict Socrates as a citizen among others who has nothing to teach, in Plato's dialogues, he is usually in a position of superiority compared to his interlocutors, who display inferior intellectual and argumentative capacities. For this reason, there is no "real" dialogue, instead the examination, deconstruction, and dissolution of their opinions by Socrates, who leads the discussion. This is an example of the fragility of Arendt's attempt at drawing a clear distinction line between Plato and Socrates.

According to her, philosophical truth can be an instrument of political domination. Nonetheless, it becomes vulnerable when exposed to the public gaze, being turned into a mere opinion among the multitude of opinions, no more truthful than the latter. Truth has no distinctive mark which can clearly set it apart from its rival, observes Arendt. This is

why the philosopher is endangered in the *polis*, as the tragic death of Socrates proved. It is an attempt at countering this peril that stands behind Plato's "tyranny of truth," based on standards derived from the eternal ideas (Arendt 1990: 74–75, 77–79, 100). When Arendt enquires about the reasons for the tumultuous cohabitation of truth and politics in her own time, she tells a very similar story about the truth teller (2006c: 237–38):

For, seen from the viewpoint of the truth teller, the tendency to transform fact into opinion, to blur the dividing line between them, is no less perplexing than the truth teller's old predicament, so vividly expressed in the cave allegory, in which the philosopher, upon his return from his solitary journey to the sky of everlasting ideas, tries to communicate his truth to the multitude, with the result that it disappears in the diversity of views, which to him are illusions, and is brought down to a certain level of opinion, so that now, back in the cave, truth appears in the guise of the *dokei moi* ("it seems to me")—the very *doxai* he had hoped to leave behind once for all. However, the reporter of factual truth is even worse off. He does not return from any journey into regions beyond the realm of human affairs, and he cannot console himself with the thought that he has become a stranger in this world. (Arendt 2006c: 237)

Detailed analysis of this connection between the philosopher and the truth teller of Arendt's day will be postponed to the next section of this paper. Before moving to her discussions of political controversies of her time, it is necessary to uncover Arendt's textual sources to identify more precisely the Platonic insights that informed her glaze.

Let us open Plato's dialogues to enlighten the original philosophical context of the words *dialegesthai* and *peithein*, which surfaces on many occasions in her analyses of concrete political issues. This philological exercise will allow us to ponder better the theoretical effects of Arendt's reading of Plato on her reflection. Her description of Socrates' speech in "Philosophy and Politics" draws from a passage of the *Apology of Socrates* (Plato *Apology*: 17 c-d) where Socrates declares his intention to perform his defense in the same way he addresses people on the marketplace. Although Arendt does not indicate the excerpts she refers to (Arendt 1990: 74), her comments match some passages of the *Apology* cited in the *Denktagebuch* (2005: 585).⁸ In the dialogue's opening,

Socrates distinguishes rhetoric from the telling of truth, on the other hand, from his own speech. The Greek text shows that Socrates uses a set of opposed terms referring to truth and falsehood. The word *pseudos* appears two times in slightly different forms (Plato *Apology*: 17a, 18a), and Socrates describes his speech with the word *aletheia*, by contrast with his accusers' sayings (*Apology*: 17b). Moreover, Socrates charges his detractors of having indicted him *oudèn alêthès*, without any truth (18b). Socrates adds that he is not an orator, a "clever" speaker, since this kind of people does not tell the truth, but he believes that orators must possess this virtue. Thus, if one could view him as one of these public speakers, he is certainly not an orator "after their fashion." While his detractors said nothing true to indict him, he himself will only tell the truth, declares Socrates (17b). He warns his interlocutors that he will not express himself by using carefully planned words and sentences, as they do, for he is "a foreigner to their manner of speech": he can only express himself spontaneously (17d). His accusers have persuaded their fellow citizens that he was corrupting the youth and was not believing in the gods, "by means of envy and slander," adds Socrates. The persuaded citizens have, in turn, persuaded their peers of the charges leveled against him. The Greek text uses a range of words related to the verb *peithô*, persuade, convince (18d). What these philological considerations reveal is, first, that "persuasion," in Socrates' remarks, is tied to falsehood. Also, Plato's master does not describe his own speech with the verb *dialegesthai*: instead, he announces that he will defend himself in the manner of *elenchos*, cross-question (18d), which closely resembles the criteria of *dialegesthai* as Arendt describes them. Thus, the discussion of "Philosophy and Politics," in which she crafts a theoretical background she will apply in her later writings, finds strong support in the opening of the *Apology of Socrates*. Truth and untruth apply to the two opposing speeches presented in the dialogue, namely, Socrates' and his detractors' discourse. Even if telling the truth and speaking as an orator sound contradictory, Socrates announces his intention to do so. Thus, *The Apology of Socrates* provided Arendt with the needed bases to argue that Plato dug a chasm between *dialegesthai* and *peithein*, the latter being associated with untruth, while Socrates attempted to harmonize them.

Plato's *Gorgias* contains a description of the opposition between these two concepts that fits even closely Arendt's depiction in "Philosophy and Politics." Interestingly, however, it is when she analyzes the politics of her own time, in "Truth and Politics," that she mentions this dialogue in connection with the theoretical contrast

between *dialegesthai* and *peithein*. Although she does not indicate the excerpts of the *Gorgias* informing her analysis (Arendt 2006c: 233), a look at the *Denktagebuch* confirms these filiations (2005: 384–89). In the *Gorgias*, Plato defines rhetoric as an art, a *technè*; a definition Arendt assimilated (2005: 384). Moreover, rhetoric would be the “finest of all arts,” and its practitioners should be called “experts” (Plato *Gorgias*: 448b–c, 449a). Plato then opposes *rhêtorikè* to *dialegesthai*, which refers to “discussion” or “debate” (*Gorgias*: 453b–c). Socrates accused Polus, who did not answer clearly to Chaerephon when he asked him to describe the kind of art characterizing Gorgias’ activity, of being more skillful at rhetoric than at discussion (*dialegesthai*). As elsewhere in the dialogue, the word *dialegesthai* applies to exchanges taking place between two or a restricted number of individuals (see 447c), as Arendt underscores in “Philosophy and Politics” (Arendt 1990: 79). This word in the *Gorgias* refers to telling the “true” things, and in some instances, of examining things with one’s fellows. Invited by Socrates to define rhetoric, Gorgias associates this kind of speech to the “dominion to single persons in their several cities” (Plato *Gorgias*: 452d). The “particular good” that comes from rhetoric is the ability to persuade (*peithein*) “with speeches either judges in the law courts or statesmen.” Rhetoric is a power that consists of being “able to speak and persuade the multitude” (*Gorgias*: 452e, see 454b). Arendt consigned these words of the *Gorgias* in her notes (Arendt 2005: 384)⁹ and underscored Socrates’s statement that the rhetorician’s speech produces belief and aims at persuasion alone. In this context, as well as in the *Apology*, persuasion induces a form of conviction neither connected to truth nor to any specific ability to distinguish right from wrong (Plato *Gorgias*: 459b–d, see 455a, 458e). In “Philosophy and Politics” (Arendt 1990: 79), Arendt also mentions an excerpt of the *Phaedrus* (260a)¹⁰ in which the term *doxa* refers to the knowledge of the just by the orator. This knowledge is not authentic since it corresponds to what “seems” just to the multitude, in contrast to what is really just. And yet, *doxa* in Arendt’s work usually has a positive meaning, revealing one’s perspective on truth.

Her praise of political speech and the centrality, in her political thought, of expressing one’s opinion in the public sphere among one’s peers through conversation was underscored. Persuasion is a specifically political ability (Arendt 1958: 27) writes Arendt; it allows one to present “its own aspect,” or its *doxa*, convincingly. The *technè politikè* is the art of persuasion understood in this way: it does not describe the art of ruling, as Plato

often suggested. It is only when one goes further than presenting its particular aspect, holds Arendt that one's becomes a demagogue, a tyrant, like the orators depicted in the *Gorgias* (2005: 390–92),¹¹ or put otherwise, when one tries to turn the dialogue into a monologue. Borrowing the Platonic depreciation of rhetoric put forward in the same dialogue, she observes that “To persuade the multitude means to force upon its multiple opinions one's own opinion; persuasion is not the opposite of rule by violence, it is only another form of it” (1990: 79). In “Truth and Politics,” she associates rhetoric to the figure of the demagogue (2006c: 233). However, she concludes that “persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it” (2006c: 259). The “truth” she refers to here is not the philosophical, transcendent, and—to her—one-sided and tyrannical truth, but “factual truth,” a concept we will introduce below. What we want to emphasize here is that to Arendt, the persuasive man is not always the good citizen speaking and acting with his peers, who is the protagonist of her description of action in *The Human Condition*. He can also appear in the guise of Plato's dishonest man who uses lies for his own profit. In a similar vein, in *On Revolution*, she observes that the discovery of the political strength of opinions in the course of the modern revolutions has opened “the doors wide to demagogues of all sort and all colours” (2006e: 220).

Arendt is more inclined to think against than with Plato when tackling political issues, for she charges the philosopher of the destruction of the politics of action through the annihilation of plurality and *doxa*, which are its basic components and conditions. Nonetheless, she sometimes appropriates aspects of his political philosophy, thus replacing the one-sided dialogue with the political side of Plato's oeuvre into a dialogue. The next section will expose the various intersections between Arendt's description of the opposition between the philosopher and the *polis* and her analyses of the uneasy relationships between truth and politics in the modern world.

TRUTH: FROM PHILOSOPHICAL TRUTH TO FACTUAL TRUTH

While in her early essay on Plato, Arendt depicts two competing conceptions of truth, in “Truth and Politics,” she introduces more types. Over the centuries, philosophical truth has had to share the stage with the revealed truth of monotheist religions and with rational truth. The latter encompasses scientific truth, whose advent in the modern age caused the disappearance of philosophical truth. Revealed truth and rational truth, like the latter, put

forward a transcendent and indubitable truth, she explains. Analyzing with political issues of her time in “Truth and Politics,” Arendt mainly relies on “factual truth,” which relates to politics and the realm of human existence (Arendt 2006c: 230–31): this is one of the most important characteristics setting it apart from the other types. Factual truth closely reminds of the kind of truth she associates to Socratic maieutics in “Philosophy and Politics.”

One encounters a very similar depiction of factual truth in “Truth and Politics,” where she refers at times to her earlier discussions on the antagonism between the philosopher and the polis, and in “Lying in Politics,” in which she deals with the problem of lying in politics at the time of the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. Because factual truth emerges from human affairs, it is fragile (Arendt 2006c: 231, 238, 251–52; 1972a: 6). The facts on which this type of truth rests are not compelling in themselves and do not convey an inherent truth: thus, they can be dismissed very easily (1972a: 6; 2006c: 231). Moreover, because these facts defy all verification, they are exposed to contestation (2006c: 249, 236). “Factual truth is no more self-evident than opinions, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion” (2006c: 243). This comment closely reminds of Arendt’s presentation of Socrates’ trial: his truth was considered as an opinion among all other opinions (1990: 79, 100). In an excerpt of “Truth and Politics” quoted above, she connects the situation of the philosopher upon his return into the cave (2006c: 237) to the truth teller’s condition. The latter struggles to impose his truth upon popular opinions in the modern world, just like the ancient philosopher did. The philosopher concludes from his repeated failures that truth is impotent (2006c: 246): thus, he is tempted by tyranny, which he views as the only way to secure the affirmation of truth (2006c: 241, 246). As to his modern homolog, “if his simple factual statements are not accepted—truths seen and witnessed with the eyes of the body, and not the eyes of the mind—the suspicion arises that it may be in the nature of the political to deny or pervert truth of every kind” (2006c: 237). His situation may be even worse than Plato’s philosopher’s: while philosophical truth is alien to the human world, factual truth properly belongs to it (2006c: 237). In both cases, truth rarely triumphs, underscores Arendt (2006c: 250). Both men are aware of the risks associated with their task, she adds, retelling at this point Plato’s saying in the Allegory of the cave: if the inhabitants of the cave could lay their hands on the philosopher, they would

kill him (2006c: 229). While the contemporary truth teller does not necessarily face such a threat, nevertheless, he needs protection. Unless he associates himself with a political formation or interest group, he risks being driven out of politics: but such support often costs him his impartiality (2006c: 250).

While Arendt denounces the compelling character of philosophical truth and rational truth, she deplores factual truth's vulnerability. The latter is constantly threatened by the powers that be (2006c: 231), as she also observes in "On the Nature of Totalitarianism" (1954), written the same year as her essay on the philosopher and the polis. Political instances and discourses either cover factual truth with "reams of falsehood" or make it fall into oblivion (1972a: 6). They can also replace factual truth with an entirely fabricated truth or reality (1994a: 354). Factual truth can clearly distinguish itself from mere lies only upon confirmation of the facts on which it is based. Such confirmation depends on the testimonies of reliable witnesses (1972a: 6; 2006c: 237–38). To clarify this requirement, let us recall a few basics of Arendtian political thought.

In *The Human Condition*, she describes the world as a "web of relationships"—which is bound to the "world of things"—in which everything is done by acting and speaking. The fact of appearing characterizes everything that goes on in this relational world. For Arendt, being and appearing coincide (Arendt 1998).¹² This conception is indebted to Martin Heidegger, who situates truth in "the phenomenality of appearance" (Assy: 2008: 41–42). This phenomenality matches his depiction of truth as *aletheia* in his reading of the Cave allegory. For Arendt, not only the actor cannot know the meaning and foresee the result of his doings before the action is done, because every action launches other actions (Arendt 1998: 199, 203; 2006c: 238), but their meaning is intelligible only to the spectator or the witness who relates the action afterwards. Without memory and testimony, action will be meaningless (1998: 179–80, 182–84, 186, 188, 192) and futile, just as Plato thought adds Arendt (1998: 185).¹³ She underlines the role of remembrance in a similar fashion in "Lying in Politics" (1972a: 6).

Facts, like actions and words, are human things. As such, they are related to other people and must be confirmed by witnesses in order to "appear" or be "real," underscores Arendt "Lying in Politics" (Arendt 1972a: 6; 2006c: 238). Far from being a mere recollection of facts, reality emerges from various stories (2006c: 261–62). Factual truth "exists to the extent that it is spoken about"; this is why it is political by nature. Even if facts and opinions must be distinguished, nevertheless, they belong to the same realm

(2006c: 238). The facts on which factual truth depends have much in common with opinions, or *doxai* as Arendt depicts them when describing Socratic maieutics: they express one's perspective. As mentioned, *doxai* are inseparable from acting and speaking, they express the individual's viewpoint on things, and they must "appear": *doxai* are related to each other in a dialogic fashion.

Nonetheless, if the establishment of facts relies on various individual standpoints or *doxai*, their affirmation is performed at the expense of the plurality of opinion. Indeed, the assertion of facts depends upon the convergence of different testimonies, that is, on the repetition of identical statements, which merges into one account. This implies that a unique story imposes itself above all others. Arendt describes this process as a form of rule by violence in "Philosophy and Politics" (Arendt 1990: 79), as underscored above. In "Truth and Politics," she holds that all rational or factual statement pretending to be "true" is above public debate and consent, which are properly political (2006c: 241). This means that the facts acknowledged as true, and whose truthfulness was established on the basis of convergent testimonies—thus, factual truth—are neither less assertive nor compelling than philosophical truth, thus, no less authoritarian, since they are also characterized by their oneness. Holding that "factual, as opposed to rational, truth, is not antagonistic to opinion" is "a half-truth," writes Arendt, for "all truth are opposed to opinion in their mode of asserting validity. Truth carries with it an element of coercion" (2006c: 239–40). Facts are within the grasp of everybody, by contrast with the dogmas or axioms of other types of truth. The former inspire a range of conflicting views whose legitimacy hinges on their ability to respect factual truth, which must prevail in politics (1972a: 6; 2006c: 238). "Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character" (2006c: 241), adds Arendt. Indeed, it closes the dialogue between different viewpoints or opinions with the imposition of a singular perspective. Here, we want to emphasize here that Arendt's distinctions between different kinds of truths are artificial and ineffective. They are motivated, at least partly, by her rejection of philosophical truth, associated with the Western tradition of metaphysics she contests and especially embodied by her Plato. But since she believes that philosophical truth is alien and harmful to human affairs, and compelling, she associates it to other kinds of "truths" which bear similar general characteristics like the fabricated truths of ideology she describes in "On the Nature of Totalitarianism" (1994a: 354). This

connection is not surprising, given the multiple associations between Plato's political thought and totalitarianism one finds in Arendt's work (Lavallée 2016; 2018).

This tension between *doxai*, and, on the other hand, facts and truth, however, sounds dissonant in Arendt's writings. "Truth and Politics" hints at the intellectual source of this tension. Pointing out that the facts established on the basis of *doxai* can be as compulsory as truths, and persuasion as unmovable as the knowledge that comes from truth, she mentions and paraphrases an excerpt of Plato's *Timaeus* (51d-e-52; Arendt 2006c: 240) discussing the Forms. The dialogue states that the True Opinion, *doxa alêthês*, and Reason differ in kind. Reason is awakened in us through teaching and is reserved for the few, while the former, which is accessible to all but also irrational, comes from persuasion and is thus alterable. While the One Opinion is named after Reason, it cannot be mistaken for the latter, since the One Opinion is an object perceptible by the senses, by contrast with reason (Plato, *Timaeus*, 51d-e-52). It is thus possible to make the dialogue say that opinion and truth are at the same time different and similar, as Arendt does (Arendt 2006c: 240) Factual truth is tied to plurality because of its origins, but it displays affinities with oneness as soon as it starts to be asserted. While it emerges from opinions, it overwhelms them and becomes resistant to them. Such reasoning, which contradicts Arendt's standard position, namely, that there is a diametrical opposition between a unique and oppressive truth which stands above and is harmful to politics, and plural opinions which are beneficial to politics (2006c: 239, 241, 59) results from a more open dialogue with Plato.

Nonetheless, facts remain tied to their origins. Arising from human affairs and, for this very reason, bound to action, they reflect the contingency and unpredictability of action. This is why sequences of facts often look surprising or incredible. By contrast, lies can sound more credible since they are carefully thought about and organized in a coherent and plausible story intended to meet people's expectations (Arendt 1972a: 6-7; 2006c: 251). Since the liar "wants things to be different as they are" and thus wishes to "change the world," he displays more affinities with the man of action (1972a: 6, 11-12) than with the truth teller, who only tries to disclose things as they are. For Arendt, it is only when politics and society are immersed in organized lying, which results from mass propaganda and ideology, that telling the truth becomes an action (2006c: 250-51; 1972a: 6-7). Of course, her usual praise of action neither implies that she sides with the liar nor condemns all attempts at changing the world as the outcome of a dishonest will.¹⁴ The man of action

as liar she has in mind has much in common with the ancient sophist depicted in Plato's dialogues like the *Gorgias*, or the contemporary demagogue, a character she mentions in pieces commented in the previous section (2006c: 233; 1990: 79; 2006e: 220).

Thus, when Arendt reflects on the relationships between truth and politics, she uses a conceptual framework first developed in her analysis of the conflict between the philosopher and the polis. She retains from this discussion the insuperable incompatibility of truth and politics, resulting from the fact that truth, discovered by the philosopher, is above human affairs, while opinions, *doxai*, come from the world. The former is unique and "mute," while the latter comes from the acting and speaking together of citizens. The latter fed Arendt's description of factual truth, since to her, the *doxai* Socrate examines reveal one's own perspective on truth. For this reason, they open to way to truth. Factual truth arises from the plurality of politics and *doxai*, but it asserts itself through a unique and coercive statement. The multiple connections between Arendt's discussions of political controversies and her narrative of the philosopher and the city, as well as some excerpts of Plato's dialogues, leave no doubt that she found inspiration in the latter. Thus, these reflections reveal that Arendt sometimes had an open dialogue with Plato, which is obscured by the predominant one-sided Arendtian story of Plato as the artisan of the decline of politics in the tradition of Western philosophy. However, she seldom acknowledges her positive appropriations to keep intact this picture of Plato, on which hinges of account of the tradition. Let us now examine more closely her reflection on opinion in modern settings.

BETWEEN OPINIONS AND LIES

Even though Arendt boasts the diversity of opinion as a crucial component of healthy politics, she sometimes envisions this very diversity as anti-democratic. If truth is the political weapon securing the philosopher's supremacy in the context of Plato's dialogues, in modern politics, by contrast, lies are the preferred device of political domination is lies. Plato has not foreseen that organized lying would become a powerful tool against truth, as in her own time, underscores Arendt: this is why he was more worried about the sophist and the "ignoramus" than the liar (Arendt 2006c: 232). Her observation in "Truth and Politics" that the opposite of factual truth is "deliberate falsehood," instead of error, illusion, or opinion, betrays her appropriation of the Platonic lexicon (2006c: 249). She

borrows this terminology again in “Lying in Politics” to describe the lies the U.S. government served to the American people during the Vietnam War, speaking of “concealment”, “falsehood” and “deliberate lie” (1972a: 14). If these semantic nuances are useful in “Truth and Politics” because Arendt’s discussion oscillates between the ancient and the modern contexts, they sound pretty strange in “Lying in Politics.” Since the meaning of the word “lie” is intuitive, qualifying it further is pointless unless one has in mind various types of lies.

Indeed, in “Truth and Politics,” Arendt reminds the Platonic distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary *pseudos*. The first means “lie” and the latter “error.” Based on the *Republic* (382), she explains that this terminology is intended to distinguish between the various meanings of the word *pseudos*, which, in addition to the two meanings mentioned, can also signify “fiction” (Arendt 2006c: 232, 298 note 5). This excerpt of the *Republic* refers more specifically to the distinction between the lie intended to deceive, the *alethôs pseudos*, “a thing that all men and gods abhor” (Plato, *Republic*: 382a), and the “useful” lie. In that part of the dialogue, the useful lie corresponds to the stories the poets tell to teach virtue to the citizens (see *Rep.*: 378e-379a, 381e). Once again, relying on the *Republic* (398b), Arendt points out that for Plato, lies can be tolerated but only as an exceptional measure, namely, if they are useful to the *polis*. The ruler has to deploy them with caution as a kind of medicine (Arendt 2006: 298, note 5).¹⁵ Obviously, the manipulation of the public opinion in the United States regarding their involvement in the Vietnam War is not an example of a “noble” political lie handled with caution and to the city’s benefit. Arendt’s terminological nuances on lies in “Lying in Politics” reflect the Platonic distinctions.¹⁶

Arendt addressed earlier the issue of governmental lies in the context of the Nazi regime. In her 1950 essay “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule,” opinions are made equivalent to lies or to the negation of factuality, and they are the expression of a tyrannical will. Commenting on the political and social atmosphere of post-war Germany, Arendt observes that “one of the most striking and frightening aspects of the German flight from reality is the habit of treating facts as though they were mere opinions,” even well-known facts (1994b: 251; 2006c: 236). After that, in “Truth and Politics,” she will connect this denial of facts to the persistence of the millenary conflict between truth and opinion (2006c: 235–37). Since Arendt has started reading Plato with great interest in 1950, one can safely connect the relationship she sketches between falsehood, opinion, and ignorance in her

essay on post-war Germany, which is consonant with Plato's (2006c: 232), to her reading of his oeuvre. This discussion also reminds one of her depictions of the fate of truth when it is exposed publicly (1990: 75, 8–9; 1994b: 236).

Nor is this transformation of facts into opinions restricted to the war question; in all fields there is a kind of gentlemen's agreement by which everyone has a right to his ignorance under the pretext that everyone has a right to his opinion—and behind this is the tacit assumption that opinions really do not matter. This is a very serious thing, not only because it often makes discussion so hopeless, but primarily because the average German honestly believes this free-for-all, this nihilistic relativity about facts, to be the essence of democracy. In fact, of course, this is the legacy of the Nazi regime. (Arendt 1994b: 251–52)

So, to Arendt, ignorance results in “untrue” opinions, even in blatant lies, which must be rejected because they destroy factuality, which constitutes the reality common to all. Opinions not founded on the latter are not legitimate (1994b: 252; 2006c: 238); namely, they are false. Thus, ignorance does not excuse collaboration and passivity under Nazi rule, according to Arendt: nobody could have reasonably ignored that serious crimes have been committed on a large scale, even if many facts were hidden from the public gaze (1994b: 260–61). But in dictatorships, a “single unfounded, irresponsible” opinion imposes its “monopoly over all others” (1994b: 152). This analysis evokes the subjugation of all opinions to the philosopher's truth and Arendt's description of the demagogue who imposes his own opinion over all others (2006c: 220). Similarly, any idea claiming to embody “the truth” has a compulsory character, like philosophical truth. So, the grip of ideology on personal opinions in post-war Germany has not been suddenly destroyed, for “the intellectual atmosphere is clouded” with “opinions formed long before the events they are supposed to fit actually happened” (1994b: 252–53). In this essay, the word “opinion” has clearly the meaning of illusion and lie.

The motive of the unique tyrannical opinion surfaces again when Arendt analyses the reasons for the French Revolution's failure in her book *On Revolution*. This time, the corruptive opinion takes the form of “public opinion.” Recalling the Founding Fathers' views on the representative democratic government, Arendt holds that the diversity of

opinions is incompatible with the “public opinion.” The former type of opinion refers to the plurality of opinions which accompanies political action. While opinions embody freedom (Arendt 2006e: 217, 9), the public opinion is consonant with tyranny (2006e: 217–18, 220; see 83), writes Arendt. “Public opinion, by virtue of its unanimity, provokes a unanimous opposition and thus kills true opinions everywhere” (2006e: 218). Where all opinions merge into one opinion which asserts itself over the former, the political realm of action disappears because the exchanges between equals, which constitute this realm, become superfluous (2006e: 83). Otherwise put, the web of relationships that makes possible the dialogue between citizens vanishes. Arendt adds that the men of the French Revolution appealed to the “public opinion” to strengthen their own opinions (2006e: 83). To her, opinions belong to the realm of individuality. Groups cannot form opinions; instead, they put forward “interests,” which are partial and rigid (2006e: 219).

In addition to discrediting public opinion, Arendt expresses reservations in *On Revolution* on plural opinions which echo her discussion of *doxa* and maieutics in “Philosophy and Politics.” Even if opinions are vital to politics, they must be examined and “purified.” This was the aim of the representative government in the Founding Fathers’ minds, writes Arendt. To them, this task should not be entrusted to a single individual, “neither the wise man of the philosopher nor the divinely informed reason, common to all men, of the Enlightenment” (2006e: 219). This task was to be endorsed by the American Senate (2006e: 218). Arendt explains that

Since opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion, their differences can be mediated only by passing through the medium of a body of men, chosen for the purpose; these men, taken by themselves, are not wise, and yet their common purpose is wisdom – wisdom under the conditions of the fallibility and frailty of human affairs. (Arendt 2006e: 219)

This analysis once again brings back to mind Socratic maieutics as Arendt contemplates it. Socrates’ “non-wise” wisdom, which strives to make truth appear through the examination of opinions, is here embodied by the Senate. Indeed, she then mentions Plato’s legacy regarding truth and opinion, and holds that the men of the American Revolution marked a new departure.

(...) they might have remembered dimly the severe blows with which first Parmenides and then Plato had dealt to the reputation of

opinion, which, ever since, has been understood as the opposition of truth, but they certainly did not try consciously to reassert the rank and dignity of opinion in the hierarchy of human abilities. (...) What enabled the Founding Fathers to transcend the narrow and tradition-bound framework of their general concepts was the urgent desire to assure stability to their new creation, and to stabilize every factor of political life into a “lasting institution.” (Arendt: 2006e: 221)

Contrary to their American homologs, the French did not create an institution dedicated to the examination of the different opinions. Arendt suggests that this lacuna contributed to the drift of the French Revolution. The proliferation of “unpurified” opinions unleashed a chaos of conflicting interests, instilling in the French people the hope for a “strong man” who can impose a unique opinion (2006e: 220). Moreover, the French people were unified by misery, which replaced the plurality of the public realm and ultimately caused the disappearance of freedom. Arendt describes this situation with the metaphor of a man of gigantic dimensions (2006e: 84–85). Interestingly, she uses this image of a gigantic “One man” when she depicts Plato as an enemy of plurality and action in *The Human Condition* and portrays the consequences of the tyrannical conception of the political she attributes to him (1998: 224).

The relation to Plato’s dialogues that predominates in the Arendtian corpus, especially in the political writings, bears the stamp of an attitude she attributes to Plato. It is a one-sided dialogue that became a monologue since it imposes a given narrative, namely, the Arendtian account of the decline of politics in the Western tradition of philosophy, and explains everything else in its light. However, as this article has shown, she had at times an open, authentic dialogue with Plato’s oeuvre. This dialogue provided her with essential insights to approach political issues like the relation of truth and lies in politics and ideology, perennial problems which plagued postwar democracies and still affect ours, and to estimate the role of opinion in politics. Many trains of thought arising from her commentary of the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which led Plato to declare war on opinion and persuasion, and to subjugate politics to philosophical truth, suggested to her basic reasons for the apparent affinity between politics and lies. Her demonstration relies, in part, on her understanding of the words *dialegesthai* and *peithein*, which would reflect the insuperable antagonism between philosophy and politics. Her discussions drew

many insights from a handful of Platonic dialogues, although she does not always mention them.

Regarding the politics of her time, she affirms that truth must triumph, even at the expense of plurality and the multiplicity of opinions. She also underlines on several occasions that opinions corrupt politics, whether under the guise of public opinion or unexamined and unpurified opinions. This analysis brings together Plato's distrust of opinion and Socratic maieutics. False opinion is a crucial category in "Lying in Politics" as well as in "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," written while Arendt immersed herself in Plato's dialogues. In the first essay and in "Truth and Politics," she also appropriates the Platonic distinction between voluntary and involuntary *pseudos*.

The numerous intersections between Arendt's reflection on ancient controversies like the antagonism between the philosopher and the *polis* and various modern situations bringing into light the proximity of lies and politics testify that Arendt's dialogue with Plato helped her to make sense of modern political controversies. Uncovering the philosophical roots of these discussions makes more intelligible some idiomatic aspects of her reflection on these political issues and contributes to understanding apparent contradictions in Arendt's reflection by unveiling the consistent and dense theoretical thinking which fed them.

NOTES

1. Our detailed study is the only one on the topic.
2. The works listed are exceptions.
3. This essay was presented as a conference in 1954 and was published posthumously. Some commentators ignore it, while others consider it as a proper piece of Arendt's oeuvre. See for instance Villa 1999a; Villa 1999b; Dolan 2005; Bernstein 2005: 280.
4. This note in Arendt's essay confirms these filiations: she mentions and approves Heidegger's conceptualization.
5. See Arendt 2006b: 291, note 16 where she mentions the new precedence of vision in connection with the recoil of *aletheia*.
6. Arendt bases her description of contemplation as *thaumazein* on a simple statement of the *Theaetetus* (155d): philosophy has no other beginning than *thaumazein*, wonder (Arendt 1990: 97).

7. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt wants to characterize the principal categories of human activities, thus she does not develop much on opinion. She insists that acting and speaking are the most important features of politics. Nonetheless, her description is fully compatible with her early comments in “Philosophy and Politics,” where she links *doxa* to appearance and self-revelation (for example, compare 1990: 80 with 1998: 50, 176, 178, 180), which is an important characteristic of action and more broadly of the political in Arendt’s thought.
8. She comments Plato, *Apology* : 17–18.
9. She comments Plato *Gorgias*: 452e.
10. See also a note on the *Sophist* (233) (Arendt 2005: 513). The knowledge of the sophist, based upon opinion, is contrasted to true knowledge (Plato *Sophist*: 233c).
11. In this note, she also contrasts Socrates’ conception of *doxa* and Plato’s.
12. In the *Denktagebuch*, this analysis is done in explicit opposition to Plato’s thought (2005: 390-391).
13. She refers there to the metaphor of the puppet moved by an invisible hand and mentions Plato’s *Laws* (803; 644).
14. See for example her plea for civil disobedience: Arendt 1972b: 55, 76–77.
15. Arendt’s reference (Plato *Republic*: 388) is wrong. Her comments are compatible with *Republic*: 389b.
16. Surprisingly, while Arendt most often condemns Plato’s political thought for being tyrannical, she has not seized the opportunity to denounce the “useful” lie. Moreover, she opposed herself to readings which accuse Plato of promoting the unrestrained use of lies in politics in the current meaning of the word, as in Karl Popper’s famous book *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1966: 138), affirming that these charges are based on an inadequate interpretation of an excerpt of the *Republic* (414c) mentioning the Phoenician tale (Arendt 2006c: 298, note 5).

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