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The Integrity of Thinking

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By Maria daVenza Tillmanns, PhD

When we look at our political landscape today, I wonder where has our integrity gone?

Teachers want to know how to explain (if that's the right word) the language and behavior of the current American president to children in their class. He lies, he is rude and inconsiderate; he bad-mouths people and makes fun of people with disabilities. And classroom teachers not only teach certain disciplines; they also teach the need for *civil discipline*. The latter seems to be lacking with the current president.

How do we teach for integrity in a time, which seems to be totally lacking in any true sense of integrity.

It is interesting to note that there are ardent supporters of the current president who maintain that they do not doubt the president's integrity. They may admit that he is not politically correct, or even rude, that he ignores protocol, but nonetheless, still has an integrity that they respect.

So what are they referring to when they believe he has integrity?

Whereas, many of us may believe that someone who lacks a sense of honesty to the point where he does not just lie, but lies as a form of speech act, others seem to believe that it is not what he says that does or does not have integrity, but that he as a person has integrity, he is *truthful to himself*. You could say that he is honest about the lack of character he exhibits.

In philosophy of language, a speech act is an utterance that has a performative function, meaning that language does not only convey meaning but also a use (*Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein, 1953). It is a vehicle for social activity. Language is used to accomplish objectives in specific situations. According to Kent Bach, American philosopher in language, linguistics and epistemology:

almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention: there is the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, such as requesting or promising, and how one is trying to affect one's audience. (Wikipedia)

In other words, the president uses the act of lying to achieve his goal, namely affect a core part of his audience. And in this way, he appears to be consistent and show

“integrity” to his supporters.

On the other hand, the notion of integrity also refers to a person who does not compromise on the means in order to achieve their goals. Integrity sets the standards of how the goal is to be achieved, namely by being sincere and fair-minded. It’s not a matter of “anything goes.” We cannot lie, cheat, disgrace, humiliate, bully and threaten our way to get what we want.

For some, “integrity” refers to the actions of a person who is apparently consistent with himself, much in the way a murderer not only says he will kill but actually kills when inclined to, or in the way that a person will say he will do anything for money and shows that in all of his actions.

On the other hand, “integrity” refers to a person who is *not* willing to compromise the truth of what he is saying, in the way a person will not compromise the truth of climate change in order to show his support of major corporations.

The current American president strongly feels that the end justifies the means. And it seems that his ardent supporters are of the same mind; as long as we get there (wherever that may be), it doesn’t seem to matter *how*. If it means intimidating people of the LGBTQIA community, people of color, immigrants, women, children of immigrants, well, that may be unfortunate, but perhaps it is the only way to “move forward.”

Many of the president’s supporters will claim that he is essentially “truthful,” meaning *staying true to his campaign promises*, “sincere,” *staying true to his core beliefs*, building “togetherness,” by *solidifying his base*, being “strong” and showing he is “tough,” by doing what it takes to achieve his goal in order to “Make America Great Again.”

The question is whether integrity (and what *type* of integrity), as we generally understand it, does matter; that *facts* matter; that reality cannot depend on how we choose to see it; that people are not simply “winners or losers,” but complex human beings that should not be treated as means, rather than ends-in-themselves.

The question is how we want to instil trust. Is it through demanding blind loyalty, demanding trust on the basis of authority alone, or by appealing to people’s own moral compass (independent of authority), and sense of what is important in life and consequently important for future generations?

We could argue that the loyalty the president's supporters have is based on their "free will," and not on loyalty alone. But this raises the question whether they would then also be "free" to disagree with him and not face serious repercussions if they did. And that does not seem to be the case.

Rather, the current president has a way of ruthlessly *punishing* those who disagree with him. This implies that he does not allow for the exercise of "free will".

Does this imply that those we believe embody integrity are those who respect people's autonomy make decisions of their own free will and are free to choose to agree *or disagree* without repercussions of being threatened, bullied, fired, or disgraced in any other way?

Is integrity based on a notion of trust – trust that people make their own decisions freely and not under pressure or duress? And is lying as a form of speech act really based on fear and the notion that people have to be coerced in their decision-making?

Let's look at the example of a salesman who tries to convince you to buy his product. The goal is that you buy his merchandise and in whatever way the salesman can do so, he will. What he says may be true or not true: either way, he does not really care; all he cares about is that *you buy the product he is selling*. He can also claim that he is not forcing you to buy the product, as though with a gun to your head. If you decide to buy the product, that's on you. If you fall for it and are better off, you are a "winner," and if you are worse off, you are a "loser."

He does the selling; you do the buying. He does "his thing"; and you do "your thing," as though there is no relationship between the two. And this becomes misleading, because there is a connection between the two and yes, there is a relationship between two people that is being used for good or for ill.

Abuse of human and natural resources not only disrespects the life of human and non-human life forms, but is also "bad for business" in the long run. We depend on our relationship with others and the world around us, and integrity respects that dependency on relationship.

The extreme focus on our independence belies our dependency on relationships.

Essential to integrity is the fact is that it does not simply see the world and other people as a means to an end. It does not exploit our connection and relationship as a

way to achieve one's goal.

Integrity honors our relationship to others and the world and honors our dependency. Individuals that exhibit integrity try to reach their goals doing little or no harm on the other in the process. The "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" in 2015 (the Iran Nuclear Deal), for example, shows a deal that was reached "without firing a shot." The joint plan of action depended on the cooperation of all members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the UK and USA) plus Germany and the EU.

Lying as a speech act, on the other hand, disrespects the underlying relationship that sustains the speech act and subsequently also lacks the integrity that it claims to have.

In his now famous publication, *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt explains the difference between someone who lies and a bullshitter. The person who lies still honors, if you will, the relationship to truth, whereas the bullshitter has no relationship to truth (p.51). The person telling a lie knows the truth and purposefully creates a falsehood. The relationship with the truth is still intact and the falsehood is meant to distract from that relationship to the truth. The bullshitter, on the other hand, does not care whether what he says is true or false; it's irrelevant. The relationship/connection between language (speech act) and truth no longer exists.

Consistent lying—or rather bullshitting as a speech act—simply focuses on achieving one's goal (at any cost) and appealing to/convincing an audience.

The salesman is solely interested in getting you to buy the product, buy his version of reality, and whether there is any true value to the product or the reality he is peddling is not important. You "buy" the product and he walks away with the cash – quite literally.

In this regard, the current US president has succeeded with his base. They bought into his bullshit and are convinced there is perhaps "truth" to what he says and they will end up ahead, thanks to him.

The overall objective of Steve Bannon, the former Chief Strategist of the current president, is precisely to overthrow the administrative state as we know it, to deconstruct Washington, and create a new political order domestically and internationally. And this, his supporters believe, will help America be "great again."

The question is whether this so-called coup can deliver. Can we, as American citizens, afford to have trade wars with the rest of the world? After all, the US economy is only

20% of the total global economy. Can we sustain a voluntary military, while discharging immigrant recruits? Can we afford to dismiss the EU, NATO, TPP, and the UN?

Can agriculture and factories continue to support the US economy without the cheap immigrant labor from abroad (a mixed blessing)?

Bannon and Trump believe that they can completely dismantle this country's relationship to its checks and balances; they believe they can ignore the reality of a democratic United States. They are convinced they alone (with "a little help" from the NRA and Putin) can create a new world order that consists of a "deconstruction of the administrative state," promoting "economic nationalism," and defense based on "national security and sovereignty." Their strategy focuses on restoring (making "America great *again*") a nation with a "culture and reason for being" (Bannon). We can only guess what that might be – Christian white supremacy.

Of course, Putin simply wants to dismantle the West in every way possible, so he's doing a pretty good job.

The point I am trying to make here is that the focus of this administration is to dismantle the relationships that have kept this democracy in place since its inception. And for the first time, we have been downgraded from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy" ([Economist Intelligence Unit](#)).

Surely, our democracy has struggled to live up to its promise of being a democracy, but the efforts being played out presently are to actively dismantle our democracy and its values.

This brings us back to the idea that the bullshitter and in this bullshitter-in-chief's objective is to dismantle the relationships this country has to its democratic institutions, the idea that through a critical discussion we can get closer to the truth. The US with all its flaws played an essential role within the world order. President Obama tried to live up to this responsibility and was greatly respected for it by world leaders, including Malala Yousafzai, who had great admiration for President Obama.

President Obama helped in the constant construction of a house using bricks. While the wolf may still be able to dismantle the house, he cannot huff and puff and blow the house down... And a house built with straw can certainly not last.

The pressure is now on to come to the rescue of this house, these United States, and prevent the dismantlement of the relationships with the pillars of our democracy.

The philosophical (and political) problem is now how to rescue our language from becoming nothing more than a way to manufacture a reality through bullshitting.

To deny climate change, for example, and to pull out of the Paris Agreement to reduce greenhouse-gas-emissions (another world-wide joint agreement), is to deny the reality of climate change and increased global warming which leads to more extreme weather patterns. To deny the rights of trans people is to deny their very experience. To deny the inequality and suffering of African-Americans at the hands of the state, and conflate their constant suffering with a protest against the national anthem, is to deny their voice.

So how do teachers teach their students in a climate of denial; and language has been hollowed out to mean nothing more than *what I want it to mean at any certain point in time*? How can teachers deal with bullshit?

How can teachers show that relationship to truth—scientific truth, moral truth, personal truth—is of greatest importance to the well-being of the planet and future generations?

Without our relationship with our moral compass intact, we are subject to the whims and wishes of dictators (political, religious or otherwise) that dictate what is acceptable, circumstances that are manufactured, and ultimately power plays to secure the dictator's position.

To make sure our moral compass stays intact and we stay in charge of our own thinking and decision-making, we need to counteract the present tendency to let bullshit run its course.

Plato wrote about the human experience and urged us, through dialogue, to connect to the human experience. He may have left his interlocutors in a state of *aporia* or puzzlement, because they found out they didn't really know what they thought they knew after all; they also developed a deeper connection or relationship to the deeper truth underlying the concept of friendship or what it means to be brave, etc.

Similarly, in the old Jewish tradition, the Jewish people were encouraged to engage G-d by asking questions.

Questions lead to engagement; engagement creates relationships. We are born in relation, says Buber,

It is simply not the case that the child first perceives an object, then, as it were, puts himself in relation to it. But the effort to establish relation comes first... In the beginning is relation – as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the a priori of relation, the inborn Thou. The inborn Thou is realized in the lived relations with that which meets it (p.27).

Our relationship with oneself and the world is of the utmost essence to undercut the bullshit that is so pervasive, so distinctive of what it means to be alive in this world today.

In bringing philosophy into the classroom, teachers can aid in the process of teaching children how to make logical, emotional, causal and explanatory connections between things: where their clothes are made and who makes them, where pollution comes from and how to address climate change, but also about what it means to be *fair and act fair*, etc.

This is where I find a lot of excitement and joy among the children discussing these ideas. Children naturally build on each other's ideas, agreeing or disagreeing with what others have said. They can be quick to change their minds. It is as if they are painting with ideas—and these ideas flow from one thing to the next in a positive, creative way. They are learning how to express themselves, how to be clear in expressing their thoughts and feelings, and explain *why* they may agree or disagree with someone. The discussion is about finding out about the nature of something; children are excited to learn about puzzling concepts. Lying may be necessary in some instances, and may be a good thing, and in other cases it may be harmful and hurtful. So how *do* you decide? And this is where navigational skills come into play. What may work in some instances may in fact be the entirely wrong thing to do in other cases. So how *can you tell*? This is where you need to learn how to respond to complex situations, and not reduce all situations to a one fits all solution.

In his article, 'The Impact of Philosophy for Children in a High School English Class' (available at inter-disciplinary.net), Chad Miller says, "The continued irrelevance and

disregard of the students' experiences, questions and ideas by schools, has too often left them with the inability to think responsibly for themselves; the school has told them what to think and why to think it." Philosophy for children on the contrary honors the inborn relationship children have with the world around them. It helps them to cultivate their inborn compass, their inner authority, be self-critical, to self-regulate, and indeed truly be in charge of their own thinking (from my article, "Children, Intuitive Knowledge and Philosophy," in *Philosophy Now*, April/May 2017).

When children and teens are encouraged to ask questions as a means to engage with the material they are learning, they learn to integrate what they learn– they learn to make it their own. This deeper involvement reaches into their own thinking and allows them to develop an understanding that incorporates different points of view, cherishing the complexity of world we live in.

This will certainly enable children to not be misled by the bullshit (which is now so insidious and destructive of the values we hold dear), because they know how to question and evaluate what they are told, or read, or hear.

The act of questioning forges relationships with the greater and more complex world as a whole. Really, we know so little in the end.

This *knowing that I don't know* is not only humbling, but restores our integrity of thinking. We know we cannot possibly have all the answers and that we depend on others and on factors we often cannot fathom that factor into limited knowledge of things.

Here I want to end with a quote from Thomas Berry in *Teihard in the 21st Century*, Arthur Fabel and Donald St. John (Eds.):

That human intelligence should establish an intimate relation with the natural world and with many of its most vital functions can be accepted so long as the deep mysteries of nature are respected. The evidence at present is that human cunning has far overreached itself in substituting human artifice for natural functioning. Already we are in a catastrophic situation in establishing a technosphere with deadly consequences on the integral functioning of the

biosphere. The brilliance of our scientists and the grand managerial skills of our technocrats are producing a historical period that seems to justify the proposed designation of the next decades as the coming "Age of Slaughter." Perhaps it would be beneficial for everyone to reflect on the statement of the biologist Lewis Thomas that "[t]he greatest single achievement of science in this most scientifically productive of centuries is the discovery that we are profoundly ignorant; we know very little about nature and we understand even less." (Teilhard in the Ecological Age, p. 67).

In "doing" philosophy with children, we create a mind-set that is receptive to the idea that we are not all-knowing and that not-knowing creates an openness to others and the world around us. It restores our relationship with "the natural world and with many of its most vital functions."

This mind-set will re-establish the integrity of thinking.

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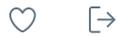
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