

**Roland Breeur, Lies – Imposture – Stupidity. Vilnius: Jonas ir Jokūbas 2019**

Roland Breeur begins with the question, raised post-Brexit by Guardian editor-in-chief Katherine Viner, “does the truth matter anymore?”<sup>1</sup> He thus situates his work in the context of on-going critical reflections concerning how it is possible that so much of democratic politics and social discourse have come untethered from basic facts and science, and been commandeered by demagoguery. Breeur focuses neither on much-discussed “science denial” nor on “fake news and social media” though, and is skeptical concerning the supposed novelty of much current-day political mendacity. Rather, he focuses on what I would call the “existential impact” of truths (and falsehoods) in subjects’ lived experiences. Breeur suggests that “truth no longer has any authority” in our current era in part because “...the truths that are proclaimed are superficial, contain clichés, and therefore cannot withstand the exuberant and pseudo-deepness of our contemporary liars...” (8). He stresses that “...truth is no value on its own” but takes on value in relation to the broader context of human experience and concerns (a corollary being that “some falsehoods are very insightful and potent” (8-9)). This focus on the meaning and value of truth (Breeur makes free and valuable use of examples from art, literature, and the history of philosophy) is a refreshing corrective to analyses that see the proliferation of disinformation in contemporary discourse primarily through the semi-clinical lens of irrational cognitive biases (not to deny that such analyses have value as well).

As the title suggests, Breeur’s project is to discuss three key ideas: lies, stupidity, and imposture. The book is organized into two parts (I. Lies and Stupidity; II. Imposture) of two chapters each, followed by an appendix. The individual chapters and sub-sections are well-written and philosophically sophisticated. However, the reader will be disappointed if they expect a sustained analysis of the relations among the book’s titular ideas or a unified account of their role in the breakdown of respect for truth more broadly. Breeur’s approach is more episodic, laying out valuable considerations and enticing formulations, but often breaking off before spelling out their full implications or connecting them to previous discussions in the book. His discussion clearly opens up these additional avenues of thought, but the task of going down them is left largely to the reader. This review briefly takes up each of Breeur’s themes: lies, stupidity, and imposture.

Chapter 1, The Last Judgment, is Breeur’s analysis of lying. Breeur invokes Arendt’s idea that facts are contingent yet stubbornly irrevocable, making them particularly uncomfortable for “political actors” who aim to bring about change.<sup>2</sup> Part of what explains this is the role of the imagination (following Sartre) as simultaneously providing subjects with the background of awareness against which facts are understood *and* an appreciation of the ways in which things could have been and *could be* different from what they are—this latter being a central component of freedom itself. The very nature of

1 Viner’s article is from 2016 and is quoted on p. 7 of Breeur 2019.

2 Developed in Hannah Arendt (1967/2000) “Truth and politics”, In Baehr, Peter ed., *The portable Hannah Arendt* (pp. 545-76) New York: Penguin, & in (1971) On lying in politics, In *Crises of the republic* (pp. 1 – 48) New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

facts thus invites the imagination of the political actor, the same imagination that grounds his freedom, to conflate lying about them with seeking to change them. Breeur identifies distinctively “post-truth” lying as involving an attack on the distinction between truth and falsity itself. Rather than trying to conceal what is true in favor of a false image, post-truth liars place all claims *and* their negations in the public square simultaneously, thus giving their imaginations and interests the widest possible sway. If this rejection takes hold credibility becomes a secondary consideration.

In Chapter 2, *Alternative Facts and the Reduction to Stupidity*, Breeur defines ‘stupidity’ as a strategy individuals deploy to avoid facing responsibility for their beliefs and commitments by placing them beyond the reach of criticism. Breeur’s central example is the retreat to personal opinion. Since opinions don’t aim at truth, saying it is “just one’s opinion” frees one of the possibilities of error and responsibility. Simultaneously, reducing the issue to one of opinion deflates the significance of what critics say, protecting one from them: “...I reduce the other’s thoughts to hot air (“What you say may be true, but it is of no value to me”)” (40). Such reduction ultimately means “a *narrowing of responsibility*”, that is “*of [the] necessity to grasp things vitally*” (38).

Breeur devotes the remainder of Chapter 2 to a fascinating but all-too-brief critique of “contemporary defenses of Enlightenment values” and of their potential role in “the proliferation of stupidity” (42-3). He takes to task contemporary thinkers like Lee McIntyre,<sup>3</sup> who tend to focus on the problem of post-truth as one of “science denial”, and to explain it in terms of irrational cognitive biases identified by social and cognitive science. Breeur critiques such thinkers for placing a naïve trust in the value of scientific truth and for working with an impoverished understanding of human nature. The discussion here is valuable and suggestive, but less thorough than some of the issues raised seem to warrant. Even thinkers sympathetic to Breeur’s concerns might wonder whether he has been fully charitable to some of the views he critiques, even in the limited space available.

The second part of the book takes up the theme of imposture. According to Breeur, “[t]he imposter is not so much a liar who opposes a false reality to a true one as a dreamer or a fiction writer who opposes her own story to the “actual” one” (60), a point he develops through discussion of Diderot’s essay “The Paradox of the Actor”. Concerning the motives of the imposter, Breeur recognizes they might be financial or political, but focuses on the imposter’s desire to overcome the distinction between appearance and reality itself, or to call into question the validity, authenticity, or truth of the institutions and roles that they attempt to mimic. Hence the relevance of the Antichrist (in Chapter 4), the ultimate or “absolute” imposter. As Breeur puts it, “...imposters do not simply repress reality, they do not seek simply to blur the line between reality and illusion – they seek to dissolve in the hearts and minds of their “subjects” the meaning and even the relevance of such lines...” (73). Imposture is destructive insofar as it tends to weaken or call into question the roles and institutions it mimics, and ultimately self-destructive insofar as the imposter has “nothing” to fall back on once his imposture begins to unravel.

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<sup>3</sup> See Lee McIntyre (2015), *Respecting truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age*, Routledge, New York, and especially 2019), *Post-Truth*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

The closing appendix, an essay on Hilsenrath's novel *The Story of the Last Thought*, which takes the Armenian Genocide as its subject, comes as something of a surprise. However, the Armenian Genocide is mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 1, also in connection with a work of art (Bosch's *The Last Judgment*). It is thus possible to see some connections. In both cases, things that are in part false or fictional are able to communicate something "true" or "real", in part by their ability to speak more directly and forcefully to vital human interests and experiences.

As already noted, Breeur leaves it largely to the reader to think through the connections among the different topics he develops (lies, stupidity, imposture). While the work is thus less unified or systematic than some might hope for, the gaps it leaves themselves form avenues for productive reflection—part of the goal of the series, *Margins*, in which Breeur's book appears. It should be added that the book itself is a lovely production in size, materials, and in the quality reproductions of the key works of art chosen and discussed by Breeur. I found the book stimulating, insightful, and valuable. A short work, it will more than repay a slow reading punctuated with regular pauses for reflection. It will be of interest to theorists thinking about issues of post-truth and alternative facts as well as to educated readers generally who are interested in thinking about and understanding some of the fraught issues at the center of our current cultural and political malaise more clearly.

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