

ACADEMIA

BRIEFLY SPEAKING

DOES TRUTH HAVE A FUTURE?

We talk to **Prof. Stanisław Filipowicz**, Vice-President of the Polish Academy of Sciences, about the significance of truth, the role of fiction, the consequences of living in a culture of excess, and the crisis of democracy.



ACADEMIA: We will be discussing one of the many books you have written. Is writing important to you?

STANISŁAW FILIPOWICZ: It is, since I've done so much of it. Until recently everything seemed so straightforward. I grew up in the belief that it is books – or, to put it in a more academic way, monographs – that are the carriers of our knowledge capital. I mainly mean my own field of the humanities in their broadest sense. This view seems shaken today. The new canon is the research article. Perhaps I have wasted my time writing books instead of conducting research projects...

Do you really feel such doubts?

I'm exaggerating slightly. And of course, it's not so much about the differences between books and articles but rather the direction of interest. Are the humanities still necessary? Bibliometric statisticians might claim that they are not.

Perhaps we aren't trying hard enough. What about philosophers, academics..?

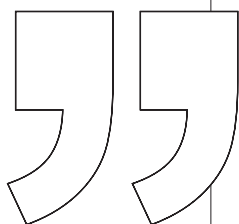
Truth can be defined in different ways. Personally, I only have a single angle. On one hand, I am interested in the bravado rooted in Enlightenment-era traditions; a certainty allowing us to perceive truth as a directive ruling everything that happens in our lives. On the other, I am intrigued by the myriad doubts which undermine this sense of security. As a historian of political thought and a scholar of political matters, I have always examined this tendency which can be seen as a certain infatuation with fiction.

So you think that we aren't really that concerned with uncovering the truth?

We have real trouble with defining truth. According to Pascal, "Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it." The Sophist philosopher Gorgias came up with the famous idea that "the concept of truth is fictitious." But here things become complicated: if there is no truth, then this sentence is false – ergo truth exists. So we are faced with a logical fallacy. I have never concerned myself with logical fallacies and I don't think about them; instead I have tried to consider the sense of our belief, rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment, that we are tuned into truth, that we desire truth and that we are prepared to defend it. This conviction rather resembles a religious view and follows the suggestion of the American historian Carl Becker who wrote about "the heavenly city of the 18th-century philosophers."

The Enlightenment fed us hope that the truth will eliminate superstitions, falsehoods and lies. Perhaps even our grandparents were brought up in this belief. Are we now turning away from it? How can we explain our propensity for fiction which you describe?

If we are going to talk about illusion, I will start by referring to Nietzsche. He posed a fundamental question – what is it that makes us think that we are always guided by the "will to truth" – and explored the concept of the "will to illusion." I believe his thoughts on the fundamental role of the will to illusion are reminiscent of eye surgery, in that they return our vision. Nietzsche rejects our naïve hopes and rash certainty shaped by the Enlightenment's supposition that the aspiration for truth is unquestionable. But is that really the case? If we take a close look at the entire subject, we should realize that we have become hostages to a certain illusion created by the Enlightenment, imposing a view that striving for truth drives everything we want to achieve. But that's not the case and Nietzsche tells us: look, the will to illusion is something which constantly accompanies us in our everyday lives.



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I suppose we all experience doubt about our own work from time to time. But I have the impression that this book lying in front of us is important, since it concerns fundamental questions. Why did you decide to discuss the issues surrounding truth?

We are accompanied by various impressions of truth throughout our lives, regardless whether we know how to get at the truth, or whether we even have a strong opinion about it. We are guided by the belief that it plays an important role in our lives, although we aren't entirely sure what it is. We have been hearing a lot about the concept of "post-truth" recently; we are often told that we are seeing a breakdown and that the era of truth is over. Of course, I think this is something of a misunderstanding, because we have always had trouble with the concept of truth. Its meaning has always eluded us; we have been trying to chase it, but we aren't getting very far.

PROF. STANISŁAW FILIPOWICZ

Are you saying that we are living in the Matrix?

Not entirely, perhaps, but we should always be asking ourselves: do we know what reality is? By assuming that we are seeking the truth we are also assuming that we are learning about reality. It is this famous, frequently repeated Platonic theory of true reality. We assume that philosophy, science, the way of thinking which reflects rationality, the power of reason, can help us reach this true reality. But what is it? On the other side we are seeing an immense arena of fiction, because, to put it simply, we are constantly imagining something; constantly stepping beyond the framework of what is and stepping beyond the boundaries of the literal which allows us to see facts. Scholars note that fiction, from the Latin *fictio*, in turn comes from the verb *fingere* which has a broad range of meanings including creating, shaping and imagining. We must constantly imagine things simply to live. We must imagine our own futures, because our lives always lead in some direction.

Are we just dreamers, then?

It's true that we enjoy fantasizing. Discrediting fiction or illusion as the unrighteous aspect of our existence makes no sense, because in fact we are constantly juggling attempts of capturing an image of things that exist with certain ideas which we are constantly creating and shaping and which occasionally gain the upper hand. In this instance, fiction isn't anything suspicious or bad, and we could go as far as saying that it is an element of our reality. For example, literary fiction is something which enriches our lives in myriad ways. Literary works really exist, which means that fiction co-shapes our reality rather than being an aberration we should shy away from.

Isn't capitalizing on this preference dangerous by making it easier for people to lie and deceive?

So far I have been talking about the upside of the situation. The problem arises when we start to take advantage of our tendency to create certain images in a dishonest way. Here we touch on subjects which help us consider the specific way in which politics is conducted today. There are attempts to influence how people think and act by any means possible; this of course means a triumph of manipulation, which in turn signifies a blurring of boundaries between noble fiction and vile lies. This brings about a political art of lies, which takes advantage of our love of fiction.

This tendency seems to be supported by the latest technologies. Would you agree with this?

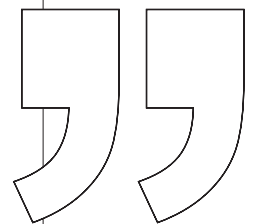
It's true that technologies help enrich our lives with fiction, because they make it easier to create parallel worlds. As individuals, as rational agents, we are dealing with a rather modest repertoire of our own means: we can watch something, we can imagine something.

The development of a range of imaging technologies means that we can view a multitude of images concurrently; at this point we could say that our sense and perception of reality converge. We see many planes, may outlines, many parallel streams all influencing our perception of reality. This can cause chaos. And I think that in this chaos it's easy for our already disoriented minds to become even more confused, and this is the point when the temptation to create fiction used as a political tool arises. The multitude of parallel worlds alters our natural perception of reality. Gradually, we are no longer able to distinguish between different variants and versions. This is the point seized by manipulators.

Does this make us defenseless?

Michel Foucault coined the fictive word of "alethurgy," defined to signify "the set of possible verbal and non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden,

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inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten." He wrote that alethurgy is the *sine qua non* of permanent order. I think that today the concepts of seeking truth dating back to traditions of the Enlightenment are beginning to break down before our very eyes; this also applies to perceiving academic knowledge as a privileged form of learning. A new situation arises, and we gradually no longer understand the need to seek truth. The outcomes of the resulting changes are difficult to predict, but the situation looks rather dark. And yes, in a sense we are becoming defenseless. All beliefs can be constantly questioned, because new variants of these beliefs and new versions of reality are constantly being created. We are ruled by the terrible concept of a "narrative," replacing the concept of truth. It can turn out at any point that our truth was actually fake news, while fake news was the truth. A great beguiling machine, a grand illusion of artificial consciousness, is being created in the public space, before our very eyes.

And politicians have their hand in it?

Of course. We are talking about the poisonous fruit of our victories in the knowledge domain, known as political technologies. And somehow as voters we must try and find ourselves in all this. The role of directed, manipulative discourse is growing in the chaos, relieving us of the duty to think. Here is where we see the breakdown of the concept of rational debate which has long shaped our expectations attached to democracy.

Are you saying that we are not stepping up to the challenge?

It's hard to be too outraged by it. We are living in a culture of excess, and we try to protect ourselves from the chaos which arises from it. We can't keep on top of the sheer volume of information; we are overwhelmed and we can't honestly keep track of everything. We apply filters – we only listen to certain people, read certain papers, watch certain TV programs. We create bubbles

for ourselves. We make choices, reduce the volume of information around us and create our own enclosed spaces. That's how a new order is formed; in reality it marks the beginning of exclusion and separation. It means that we are distancing ourselves from one another; we wish to be in our own space so that we maintain at least some balance because it is impossible to live under so much pressure.

Is this the root of so many political conflicts?

Yes, of course. The trend we are talking about is very worrying. After all, it means that the public sphere is dominated by an absence of mutual understanding, which in turn leads to conflict. Agreement is impossible if we cannot have a common perception and understanding of certain issues because everyone has their own version of reality and truth referring to it. I think that the ease with which we are able to create different versions and variants, and the ease with which we can juggle them, has become our downfall.

**Prof. Stanisław Filipowicz
(PhD, DSc)**

Ordinary Member of the PAS, professor at the University of Warsaw (Department of Political Science and International Studies), historian of political thought studying the crisis of liberal democracy and the erosion of models of political rationality dating back to the Enlightenment.



PROF. STANISŁAW FILIPOWICZ

Our entire wealth is, after all, virtual. It eventually becomes our misery, because our world becomes blurred without any clear reference points.

Does this mean that democracy is purely about good political marketing? Has truth been replaced by marketing?

Yes, I'm afraid so. Today we are dealing with a marketing aberration, which means that we treat all our actions in a purely instrumental way. If we are discussing democracy seriously, it's clear that it was originally based on completely different foundations. I always stress that our trust in democracy results largely from our trust in truth and our belief that we as a society will seek truth together rather than try to deceive one another. Generally speaking, the concept of the public sphere and public debate shaped during the Enlightenment followed this thinking. Today, and I say this with full conviction, we are dealing with a kind of degenerated marketing. By revealing this degeneration and seeking arguments, we should remember Kant and his categorical imperative according to which our humanity should always be the goal rather than the means. Today we are seeing the reversal of the principle: everything is seen as a means. People are being manipulated with the aim of achieving success defined as very narrowly seen political goals. In the short term it's effective, but only to some extent. It is becoming increasingly clear. This mechanism continues to function, but it has been deciphered and politics is increasingly seen as a domain of demoralization, marked by constant abuse of trust. The crisis of democracy is discussed in myriad ways, but I think that the manipulative marketing concept of politics does not have much of a future, unless the entire population loses their ability for critical thinking and detecting falsehoods. Will this really happen? I don't know, but it certainly seems possible. But I really don't want to imagine our future in this light.

In such a world, someone would be constantly playing with our beliefs and ideas, with an almost hypnotic effect.

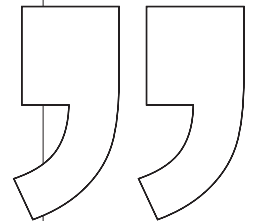
It would be terrible. But I don't think the very concept of truth has collapsed; not everything is lost. The concept of post-truth has certainly caused confusion, but we are still attached to various concepts of trustworthiness and I think that our culture is still founded on defined traditions based in the concept of truth. They remain very deeply rooted. However, the world of politics is now very distant from the canon of ideas which defined the Enlightenment. The shift has been rapid and the effects have already been devastating. I'm afraid I am talking about the Internet; the culture of deceitful fiction seems to have taken root online. It's something everyone thinks and talks about today. The Internet has created an open space of perfidious and

highly effective manipulation. If we continue blindly following technological progress, we are going to be in trouble. I think, though, that ethics and our desire for truth should limit this; in any case we should focus on a concept of the world which would help us reach our goals.

I'm sure we would all agree, but where do we find a foothold?

The attitude I am describing requires determination, consistency and honesty. It also requires a degree of reflection: turning our attention to the destructive effects of the trends we are seeing today. We have a culture of expecting easy success and spectacular achievements, and it's worth turning our attention to this overvaluation. We have long believed that effectiveness is directly linked to truth; to put it simply, that the things that are effective are rooted in truth. Today the tables have turned, and we assume that it

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is things which are effective that are true. In this respect politicians are right because they achieve their goals, never mind that they violate all principles of honesty which had, until now, been fundamental. I still think that in spite of everything they haven't lost this significance, but there remains a strange ambiguity in this. Do people genuinely care about truth? I'm not certain myself. To some extent they do, but we also know that the greatest lie of all would be to claim that people can live without lies, and that everything in our lives is subordinate to truth and honesty. But what's really the case? We are carried by turbulent waters, and the elements of truth and lies are constantly in motion.

Which one do you think will ultimately win out?

I don't suppose much will change, and I doubt we will reach the happy isles. We are losing our heads with all the information, to the extent that we staggering blindly. We all know perfectly well that politicians use lies to carve out a place for themselves – by manipulating reality, they try to capture our collec-

tive emotions and give them direction. But when it comes down to it, we don't know what to do. What are Americans supposed to do with Donald Trump? He is a politician who doesn't care for truth in the slightest, and his multiple lies have already been revealed. In spite of this, he is the leader of the most powerful nation in the world. Is there a way to eliminate these strategies of evading the truth? We once imagined that spaces exist where we can carve out our own, independent position – that we gain strength from living in a civic society. But this world has been eroded and is slipping away. We are stuck in front of a screen showing pure fiction.

Doesn't this fiction bring us consolation and joy? Should we just trust politicians and let ourselves be soothed by them?

Unfortunately, it is a toxic, incoherent fiction. It doesn't bring us peace. By absorbing different versions of reality, we get lost – we no longer know which

So should we be making a return to the traditional model?

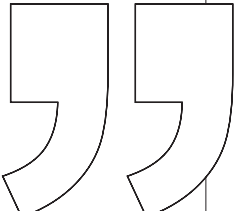
Probably, but it would be a huge educational challenge. Everything changes so rapidly today. Let me get back to marketing. In 1968 in Paris, during the student protests, one of the young people's demands was to end the teaching of political marketing. The practice was seen as contrary to the decency required of an honest society. It turned out that it had lost all its meaning, and we could go as far as saying that preferences have been turned back-to-front. Today the overarching goal is success. The world is structured as a great machine of achievement; success can be attained in spite of truth, while truth can destroy us. Can you imagine someone speaking the truth in politics? Honesty usually spoils the image of success – a perfect example is the sad truth about the impending climate catastrophe. Perhaps this is why we no longer like truth, and we would need a fundamental change to shift our thinking from focusing on success back to focusing on truth. Perhaps the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk is right when he says that we are experiencing psychedelic capitalism. And it's all around us: ads for makeup and fast-cash loans seem more important than reports on melting glaciers.

So what can academics do? Are scholars of the humanities able to take control over this mayhem?

Definitely. They can and must be involved. Of course, I myself come from the tradition of the humanities, so this question is of huge significance. I am reminded of Hanna Arendt's warning in *The Human Condition*. According to Arendt, the *homo faber* mentality is further evident in the substitution of the notion of "utility" for "worth." I think scholars of the humanities understand this difference particularly well, and they are able to explain its great significance. The issue also concerns the role of the humanities in society.

Do you share the view that the humanities are underappreciated?

Very much so. I want to stress that I think that the humanities do not and should not participate in the division-of-labor we are seeing in the technosphere. The humanities must ensure they have their own, distinctive voice. Unfortunately, there is a widespread belief that the world is becoming increasingly uniform and that we are all heading in the same direction. I think this is a very dangerous illusion. Questions about meaning are completely different than questions about utility. The technological sphere is measured by different factors than the humanities, in that the latter don't consider utility as a goal in itself. Broadly speaking, scholars of the humanities focus on the truth of the human experience as a whole, not just in terms of utility. Writers, poets, artists, com-



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version we would even prefer. This is terrifying, because it would be easier for us to catch our balance if we knew that there exists a Reality No. 1 where we know all the rules. We now know that many parallel worlds exist. They are manufactured skillfully and convincingly, then "sold" to the public using political jargon. But where is "our" reality? After all we are constantly in motion and changing our personas. That's the pace of modern life. I am not talking about myself, because I am very behind the times – I don't even have a Facebook account. But if someone has several accounts and lives their online life as several personas, then the question over which one they hope to be the most successful becomes rather troubling. Because of this, for many people politics is no longer important – it is no longer the center of their world. They no longer have a solid reference point, and the ability to use fiction at every step, going as far as deceit, becomes something of an adventure people want to participate in because it gives them a sense of freedom. Their real name gets lost along the way, as they pick up a new alias, a new avatar, a new personality. They end up lost.

PROF. STANISŁAW FILIPOWICZ

mentators on great artworks are absolutely essential in this sphere.

By saying that, aren't you opening yourself up to the accusation of painting a rather utopian vision?

On the contrary; I believe that belittling the role of the humanities means a turn towards a kind of utopia. Let's not forget that it is the scholars of the humanities who complicate our lives by undermining our hasty faith in easy success. Our aim is to develop our understanding and broaden the effectiveness of our actions. And that's great, but experience constantly confronts us with situations which shift our way of thinking and change how we perceive things. And we start seeing our effectiveness very differently. Only the humanities allow us to see this multidimensionality; only they don't bow down to the concept of usefulness. Without the humanities, the very idea of freedom would become empty. And is this something we want?

What do you mean when you talk about changing our way of thinking?

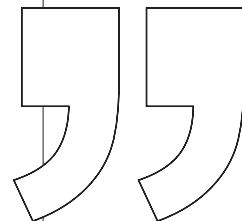
Experiences which disrupt the notion of algorithmic effectiveness. Can we take full control over our lives and subject them to rigorous rules? Let's take illness as an example. Illness is always an existential problem which extends beyond scientific classification. The finest state-of-the-art medical technologies will not free us of the burden of questions illness faces us with. Should we pretend that this aspect of our lives is not important, that it no longer counts, that we can forget about scholars of the humanities because their craft is now useless, that they will soon be replaced by AI just like Wikipedia is replacing professors? Isn't that a terrifying vision? I am very worried, because I'm afraid we are dealing with a tendency to excuse treating the humanities as a field whose charms are gradually growing depleted. This is simply not the case. The humanities reach where others can't because they are concerned with entirely different matters. Naturally, by questioning the principles of an instrumental mind, those who study the humanities fall from grace; they are seen as outsiders and intruders in the technosphere. If I may allow myself to be slightly provocative, I would add that I agree with the view of the great philosopher Giambattista Vico that poetics is at the root of human wisdom. A poetic mind constantly demands and achieves a voice because we need it; because art, literature, theatre, cinema exist. The field of symbolic thinking has lost nothing of its importance – and in any case this is clear in politics. It has to be noticed, studied, understood, and without the humanities we would be helpless.

This brings me to my last question. How do you see the humanities in today's Poland? You work

with young academics – how do you perceive the condition of the humanities?

I am full of admiration for the achievements of the humanities. I don't want this to sound self-congratulatory, but I can honestly say that working in academia and my long relationship with the Polish Academy of Sciences have convinced me that we are experiencing a terrific accumulation of cultural capital. We cannot lose it – in fact it is our duty to nourish it. Perhaps mother nature means some people are doomed to follow certain directions, make sacrifices and study subjects many others find incomprehensible, but I can see the passion is as strong as ever. In any case, as an academic lecturer I see plenty of talented people every day; I know we are not in danger of regression or breaking with traditions, although we do seem to be experiencing a conflict of values. And those who work in the humanities must defend their principles. I don't think we're about to face shortage of enthusiasts. And I think that's the most important thing, because it al-

We should always be asking ourselves: do we know what reality is?

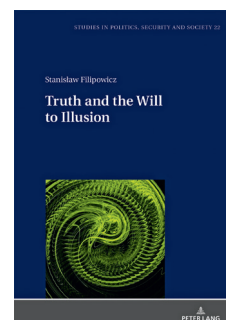


lows us to see the future. The rest is all about youthful energy and talent. This strength always overcomes barriers. So yes, I am optimistic that the humanities will come through.

There will be no shortage of those seeking sense rather than just utility?

I think so. I continue to believe it. It should be added that lofty ideas can of course be combined with a sense of usefulness and purpose. Let's remember that it is scholars of the humanities who build the sphere of communication, and it is only them who can explain why developments in science and technology make sense. They never stop asking fundamental questions and shaping the culture in which they can be asked and answered. If we lose this space for communication, we will become trapped and all that we will have left is impetus. By intertwining the humanities with the sciences, we can create a magic wand creating new wonders of the new millennium. Unless they are swept away by that hurricane known as the impact factor...

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI



Stanisław Filipowicz,
*Truth and the Will
to Illusion*,
Bern, Berlin, New York:
Peter Lang, 2018.