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Dirty Laundry: A Philosophical Primer for Politicians on Scandal

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Abstract: This article discusses the management of post-sex scandals by politicians from a variety of theoretical and/or philosophical perspectives.

Sex and money seem to trip up people of influence in all walks of life. The term politician can be applied to them, be they government officials, corporate titans, religious leaders, civic mandarins, teachers, boffins, or smaller versions of the same throughout the world. They're politicians because all have more of something than most other people in some special context—more of special finite resources in a context of infinite need. It's not that sex and money don't trip up people without influence. But stories of people of influence tripping up seem to influence us more. Or at least get our attention in the service of schadenfreude. If the people above us come tumbling down, we can pretend to be relatively higher up. Or being down becomes more tolerable.

But this article will focus not on the why of scandal but on the management of the inevitable. How should politicians craft narratives to cut their losses or even turn a loss into a win under the gaze of scandal-hungry audiences?

First, there's one of Zeno's many paradoxes. One version is that in any pending interaction between two objects—like lips about to kiss forbidden lips or graft dropping into a pocket—one object travels half the distance to the other or somehow becomes less distant to the other by half. Then the two become even closer by half, then by half again, and yet again and again. They never complete the interaction. Even if the intention is to increase tension or excitement by not actually touching, this is not completed by transcending that last half. So the video or eyewitness account or phone tap must be doctored or falsely representing what occurred. It couldn't have happened. Who are you going to believe, me or you own lying eyes or ears? This throws out at least a tenuous buoy or fig leaf to True Believers of the politician or that politician's supporters at partisan mass media sites or to those who have no use for or can't handle or don't want to handle the truth.

Second, there's the Prime Mover/Unmoved Mover problem. If Zeno's paradox won't cut it, the argument now becomes "...sure I knew a woman or man not my wife or husband or significant other carnally...but it's not my fault." Something beyond my control caused me to do it. Then the politician can go through an infinite regress of causal agents or a finite one that stops with God—the only Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover of the Universe. Either way, the politician owns up to being virtually powerless regardless of an experience of one's free will or something simply irresistible, regardless of the presence or absence of determinism at least as conceived of by humans through some veil of ignorance or veil of Maya.

Third, there's theodicy as a topic partially attempting to resolve the concurrent existence of evil and God. One possible resolution is that even the most evil of acts and the most tragic and sinful of circumstances is part of God's plan. With a touch of rudimentary logic, punishing the politician or accusing the politician of some sordid behavior is punishing and accusing God. At least in the United

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States, using God as a rhetorical weapon can work wonders every bit as wondrous as religious text, divine revelation, or a frequently repeated big lie.

Fourth, there are Plato's Ideal Forms. Allegedly, earthly reality is only an approximation of the real thing—some trans-earthly Ideal. The pop figure Madonna may sing of being a material girl in a material world, but through song she just substantiates not being real. In fact, to Plato, singing [especially through poetry] about materiality is actually twice removed from the ideal as real—once for our world and once for the song within. So, that hands-on approach to supervising young interns or that huge campaign contribution that is sliced and diced to simulate coming from multiple sources instead of just one donor so as to adhere to electoral law never really happened. It may look like what you think it is, but that's not what it is. It's something else.

Fifth, there are Derrida's possible and impossible aporias. These refer to how difficult it is to fully pin down the meaning of any text or act, because within any impending meaning are the seeds of its opposite. Also, we only can approach any meaning asymptotically, because meaning depends partially on the difference of the text or act to other texts and acts. There is never any central, stable foundation from which uncontested meaning can spring. Thus, in some ways the text or act related to the money and sex at Issue always can be contested or, at least, deferred. Again, the proper response to accusation is that it's not what you think. The meaning you ascribe to my behavior is a tenuous one, because all our behaviors ultimately are puzzling and lead us to impasse, even paradox. Guilt beyond a reasonable doubt cannot occur. Or should we doubt this as well?

Sixth, there's the death of the author as popularized by Roland Barthes. In attempting to describe the source or voice of a text and its meaning—viz., Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*—Barthes identifies many possibilities. Is it the fictional narrator? Is it the author—Balzac as sharing his own life experiences or making an ideological point? Is it some putative universal wisdom or spirit of the times? If you believe, as Barthes may, that with writing comes the very destruction of the author and all sense of authorship, we are left with attributing meaning to the reader of the text and act. Of course, here, is the reader just another author who is not dead? Nevertheless, an accusation towards a politician says less or nothing about the politician and more or everything about the accuser. It is almost as if through Freudian projection, the reader (the accuser) unconsciously takes part of her own self and places it within the accused and then accuses the accused of something actually residing within the accuser. In fact, through projective identification, the accused may unconsciously play along with this. Nevertheless, the politician may state, "I'm the embezzling pedophile? No, you're the embezzling pedophile."

Given that money and sex have something to do with need, want, and desire, it's appropriate to conclude with a comment about Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* with sections written from 1814 through 1859. It may be that emotions, sex, other physical needs, and needs for control and power not only constitute what is human but also human perception of the world. The object of scandal allegations is merely doing what is human, what accuser and accused would do. The pot, the kettle, throwers of stones in glass houses, all are dancing on life's hot stage and in houses of ill repute. And according to Schopenhauer, even with so-called satisfaction will come soon enough boredom and then lack once again.

Yet some laundry is too dirty to be washed and cleaned and, thus, remains dirty laundry. No matter how many times it's hung out to dry in the freshest of breezes and the gentlest of suns. Philosophy may pose as the White Knight, but people, the lay philosophers, will continue to talk about dirty laundry.

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