

The teleological arc of disinformation ethics: from the pomadistas of Machado de Assis to the deniers of the pandemic

O arco teleológico da ética da desinformação: dos pomadistas de Machado de Assis aos negacionistas da pandemia

El arco teleológico de la ética de la desinformación: de los pomadistas de Machado de Assis a los negacionistas de la pandemia

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes different purposes of disinformation practices, notably in the field of public health. The method includes a multidisciplinary comparative bibliographic analysis, in the interface of philosophy and information science, having as main objects of investigation a literary document by Machado de Assis, published in 1822, and a government document made available for the public by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Pandemic, in 2021. The aim is to compare the ethics that guide the fictional actions of the charlatans of the Machadian tale (the “pomadistas”) and the practices of disinformation in public health, as pointed out by the CPI. The result of the analysis reveals the scope of the phenomenon of disinformation and its results, in an arc that can go from the life protection until driving to death. It is concluded that disinformation needs to be discussed responsibly to avoid thoughtless or moralistic representations, and the studies based on information ethics can contribute to the philosophical deepening and critical evaluation of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Information ethics; Disinformation; Pandemic; Covid-19; Public health.

RESUMO

O artigo analisa distintas finalidades de práticas desinformacionais, notadamente no campo da saúde pública. O método contempla análise bibliográfica comparada multidisciplinar nas dobras da filosofia e da ciência da informação, tendo como principais objetos de investigação um documento literário de Machado de Assis, de 1822, e um documento governamental da Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito da Pandemia, de 2021. O intuito é comparar a ética que orienta as ações ficcionais dos charlatões do conto machadiano (os “pomadistas”) e as práticas de desinformação em saúde apontadas pela CPI em pauta. O resultado da análise revela a amplitude do fenômeno da desinformação e seus resultados, em um arco que pode se estender da proteção à vida até a condução à morte. Conclui-se que a desinformação precisa ser discutida com responsabilidade para evitar representações irrefletidas ou moralistas, e os estudos baseados na ética da informação podem contribuir para o aprofundamento filosófico e a avaliação crítica do fenômeno.

Palavras-chave: Ética da informação; Desinformação; Pandemia; Covid-19; Saúde pública.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza diferentes propósitos de las prácticas de desinformación, especialmente en el campo de la salud pública. El método incluye un análisis bibliográfico comparativo multidisciplinario, en la interfaz de la filosofía y las ciencias de la información, teniendo como principales objetos de investigación un documento literario de Machado de Assis, de 1822, y un documento gubernamental de la Comisión Parlamentaria de Investigación sobre la Pandemia, de 2021. El objetivo es comparar la ética que guía la acción ficcional de los charlatanes del cuento de Machado de Assis (los “pomadistas”) y las prácticas de desinformación en salud, señaladas por la CPI. El resultado del análisis revela la amplitud del fenómeno de la desinformación y sus resultados, en un arco que puede ir desde la protección a la vida hasta la conducción a la muerte. Se concluye que la desinformación necesita ser discutida con responsabilidad para evitar representaciones irreflexivas o moralistas, y los estudios basados en la ética de la información pueden contribuir para la profundización filosófica y la evaluación crítica del fenómeno.

Palabras-clave: Ética de la información; Desinformación; Pandemia; Covid-19; Salud pública.

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INTRODUCTION

Why give attention to someone who doesn't know where his nose is?

Who are you, that you don't know what you say?

(Noel Rosa)

In addition to its aesthetic attributes, non-scientific literature – notably that produced by novelists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, and other goldsmiths of words in the broad sense – can instigate the thinking and reflection of researchers around themes that are dear to philosophy and science. From Greek or Amerindian mythology to medieval or modern romance, passing through Shakespeare's plays, the poems of Goethe and Camões, or the narratives of Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, and Kafka, the inspiration that fiction lends to the most diverse nuances of the scientific field is vast, such as any search in academic publication repositories can attest.

In Latin America, the magical (or fantastic) realism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s is a source of ideas for the exercise of sociological and philosophical creativity instigated by the works of authors such as the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Mexican Juan Rulfo, the Argentinean Julio Cortázar, and the Peruvian Manuel Scorza. Although it is a literary style characterized by a rejection of formal rationality, the fantastic reality that emerges in the short stories and books of the writers mentioned above is often found linked to socio-political and ethnic-racial contexts as a kind of allegory – in the sense of Benjamin (1984) – of the Latin American condition, exposing the oppression of colonialism and the weight of foreign capital on the shoulders of the working classes.

In Brazil, the closest thing to magical realism can be found in the works of Murilo Rubião, a 20th-century author¹. However, decades before, the novelist, poet, storyteller, columnist, journalist, playwright, and literary critic Machado de Assis had already directed his pen at the service of similar contours. The novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, from 1881, inaugurates Machado's realism through the critical paints with which the carioca writer paints the hypocrisy and selfishness of the Brazilian elite. The following year, the collection of short stories *Papéis avulsos* was released and reinforced Machado's vocation to, through fiction, impose – as he had already done in the previous book – an ironic and scathing representation of the values that shaped the ethics of the noble halls of bourgeois societies, particularly those who inhabited the then capital of the Empire of Brazil at the end of the 19th century.

Although there are many examples of characters and situations described in Machado's work that attest to this assertion (such as the short stories *The Mirror* and *Theory of medallion*, from the same book), for this article, we will focus on those and those that the author presents in *The secret of Bonzo*, the sixth story in the book, originally published in the newspaper *Gazeta de Notícias* on April 30, 1882. The reason for the choice is presented by Machado himself in a note: “the bonzo in my writing is called Pomada, and pomadistas as its sectarians. ‘Pomada and pomadista’ are familiar expressions in our land: it is the local name of charlatans and quackeries” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 248, emphasis added).

The analysis of the practices of Machado's “pomadistas” is the starting point of the methodological journey of this article, which aims to discuss, from a multidisciplinary perspective, in the folds of philosophy and information science, the teleological arch that we will call the ethics of “disinformation” – understood here as the deliberate, intentional act of misinforming (BRISOLA; BEZERRA, 2018). The use of the “teleological” predicate refers to the classic ethics of Aristotle (1984), based on finalism, which attributes virtue to action based on orientation towards the common good of its *telos*, that is, its results, consequences,

1 We can also see traces of the style in works by Érico Veríssimo (*Incident in Antares*, 1971), Jorge Amado (*Dona Flor and her two husbands*, 1966), and Mario de Andrade (*Macunaíma*, 1928), among others.

products, and points of arrival. This means, in other words, that our interest is focused on investigating different ‘purposes’ that the various practices of disinformation can give lead when based on possible ‘results’ that they produce in social reality.

In order to illustrate the variety of results produced by the disinformation phenomenon we are focusing on, we will advance our method by analyzing the actions of a distinct sect of real-life contemporary pomadistas: the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic deniers, who embody one of their most draconian faces in the charlatanism practiced by a group of doctors from the company Prevent Senior at the expense of the health of their clients, as described in the Final Report of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) of the Pandemic, a document produced by the Federal Senate of the Brazil at the end of the work of the CPI in 2021 (BRASIL, 2021).

The opposition between fiction and reality, as we concluded at the end of our investigation, contributes to the exercise of a detailed analytical scrutiny of the ethical issues that unfold around the phenomenon of disinformation (BRISOLA; BEZERRA, 2018; FROEHLICH, 2019; 2020; WARDLE; DERAKHSHAN, 2017), which has gained prominence on the global political agenda and generated discussions in the field of information studies and various academic fields – the Multidisciplinary perspectives on disinformation in science and health dossier, which this article brings, is one of several recent examples of collections of scientific articles on the subject that can be found on the internet.

By presenting readers with different purposes that can be observed in the broad spectrum of disinformation practices, in order to be able to glimpse the teleological arch of the ethics of disinformation, we seek to distance ourselves from the pitfalls that a moralistic and unreflective view of the subject can acquire, taking into account the given attention gathered by the phenomenon of disinformation from the development of communication mediated by portable digital devices and, in tow, the new possibilities of customized manipulation that current practices of surveillance and the monitoring of digital personal data allowed (BEZERRA, 2015; ZUBOFF, 2020). The point of arrival is the exploration of the conceptual richness of this semantic field, full of subtleties and ambiguities, but not for that reason blurred to such an extent that the poles can be simply exchanged without major consequences.

THE MACHADIAN POMADISTS

It is from Brazilian literature that we extracted the document whose analysis will provoke our initial reflections, admitting that the diversity of types of documentary sources is welcome to multidisciplinary research. The short story *The Secret of Bonzo* by Machado de Assis (2011) is set in the fictional kingdom of Bungo in the 16th century, is – as the writer’s texts commonly are – brilliant, funny, and, in a certain sense, current at the same time when exploring, in a few pages, five hoaxes, tricks, swindles, or lures, the first four harmless (from the point of view of their results for society) and the last of the beneficial type. All farces are carried out in fulfillment of “a new doctrine, they say, invented by a great bonzo with much knowledge [...], named Pomada, an old man of one hundred and eight years, well read and knowledgeable in divine and human letters.” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 162-163). The new doctrine would have been forged by Pomada after the wise old man found that “virtue and knowledge have two parallel existences, one in the subject who possesses them, and the other in the spirit of those who listen or contemplate them,” and that “there is no show without a spectator” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 163). This is where Pomada comes from:

[...] in order to enlighten the understanding a little, I had consumed my long years, and, moreover, nothing would be worth it without the existence of other men who saw and honored me, so I wondered if there might not be a way to obtain the same effect, saving such labors, and that day I can now say was the day of the regeneration of men, for it gave me the saving doctrine. (ASSIS, 2011, p. 163)

From the judgment at first reasonable, disenchanted, and naughty, the dangerous conclusion unfolds: “if a thing can exist in opinion, without existing in reality, and exist in reality, without existing in opinion, the conclusion is that out of the two parallel existences the only thing necessary is opinion, not reality, which is only convenient” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 163). The supposed correctness conclusion is substantiated by the example of the success of Patimau and Languru, the first two followers of Pomada that appear in the text, the former claiming to know the origin of crickets, the knowledge that would be “the fruit of long years of application, experience and study, work, and even danger to life,” and the other guaranteeing, “with great admiration and applause from the people around him, that he had finally discovered the principle of future life” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 161). In the words of bonzo Pomada:

[...] crickets cannot be born from the air and coconut leaves, at the conjunction of the new moon, and, on the other hand, the principle of future life is not in a certain drop of cow's blood; but Patimau and Languru, astute men, with such art were able to put these two ideas in the minds of the crowd, whom today enjoy the name of great physicists and greatest philosophers, and have people who are capable of giving their lives for them with them (ASSIS, 2011, p. 164).

After listening to the wise old man, during his indoctrination and conversion to “pomadismo,” together with the alparqueiro Titané and the doctor Diego Meireles, the narrator of the story tells that the bonzo “interrogated us for some time, at length, about the doctrine and its fundamentals, and after acknowledging that we understood it, he urged us to practice it, to divulge it cautiously” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 164). Titané then prints his new knowledge about the pomadista quackery in the local newspaper – described by Machado as “a paper made of ground cinnamon bark and gum, a masterpiece, [in] which they carve [...] the week's, political, religious, mercantile, and others news” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 165) – to instill in public opinion an overvaluation of its espadrilles, “the first in the world, for being very solid and graceful”, arousing “curiosity and ardor” in the local population and leading them to buy their shoes “at the price I charge them” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 166). The narrator, an average charamela player, gathers the townspeople to hear him strum the wind instrument and, as he himself narrates, “with the sole resource of ademanes, the grace of arching his arms to take the charamela [...], the rigidity of the bust, the anointing with which I raised my eyes to the air, and the disdain and pride with which I lowered them to the same assembly,” manages to break out in the audience” such a concert of voices and exclamations of enthusiasm that almost persuaded me of my merit” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 167).

So far, we have reported four distinct disinformatonal practices. In the explanation of the origin of the crickets by Patimau, and the drop of cow's blood for eternal life by Languru, we have portrayed traditional tricksters, who are suggested to have existed among all peoples and times, relatively harmless, tricksters inventing fibs in search of money, banquets, and boos. Meanwhile Titané, the alparqueiro, anticipates the advertising industry of the footwear sector, but still in an artisanal scheme, without exploiting semi-slave labor of young people in Indonesia, as Nike has already been accused of doing – remembering that most of the price of each pair of tennis comes from the cost of advertising, in addition to the profit margin being insignificant with production costs involving salaries (DOWBOR, 2000, p. 50-51). Finally, the narrator, a charamela player, anticipates the musical sector of the cultural industry in which the spectacular image is worth as much or more than the music. But we still don't have Anglo-Saxon cultural imperialism or the wide promotion of artists on radio and TV through secret payment to the media vehicles (commonly called the jabá industry) in action, shaping tastes and worldviews.

The surprise is in the last of the disinformation practices of Machado's story, “the most ingenious of all our experiences” (ASSIS, 2011, p. 167) carried out by doctor Diego Meireles. For the purposes of this article, the case described in the last two paragraphs of the text deserves to be accompanied in full:

At that time, a singular disease was spreading in the city, which consisted of making the noses swell so much that it took half and more of the patient's face and not only made it hideous, but it was annoying to carry such a weight. Although the physicists of the earth proposed to extract the swollen noses for the relief and improvement of the sick, none consented to lend themselves to the curative, preferring the excess to the gap, and considering the absence of that organ more abhorrent than anything else. In this tight struggle, more than one resorted to voluntary death as a remedy, and sadness was excellent throughout the city of Fuchéu. Diogo Meireles, who had been practicing medicine for some time, as mentioned above, studied the disease and recognized that there was no danger in disemboweling patients; on the contrary, it was advantageous to bring them harm, without causing ugliness, as a misshapen nose and heavy as none; he did not succeed, however, in persuading the unfortunate to sacrifice. Then a graceful invention occurred to him. So it was that gathering many physicists, philosophers, bonzos, authorities, and people, he communicated to them that he had a secret to eliminate the organ, and this secret was nothing less than replacing the flattened nose with a healthy nose, but of a purely metaphysical nature, that is, inaccessible to the human senses, and yet as true or even more so than the cut one; this cure is practiced by him in several places, and is very accepted by the physicists of Malabar. The astonishment of the assembly was immense, and no less the disbelief of some, not to say all, and the majority did not know that they believed, because if they were repugnant to the metaphysics of the nose, they yielded in the meantime to the energy of Diogo Meireles' words, to the loud and convincing tone with which he expounded and defined his remedy. It was then that some philosophers, present there, somewhat ashamed of the knowledge of Diogo Meireles, did not want to be left behind and declared that there were good foundations for such an invention since the whole man is nothing more than a product of transcendental ideality; as a result of which he could in all likelihood wear a metaphysical nose, and the people swore that the effect was the same.

The assembly acclaimed Diogo Meireles, and the sick began to seek him in so many copies that he had no hands to measure. Diogo Meireles dissected them with great art; then, he would delicately reach with his fingers to a box, where he pretended to have substitute noses, pluck one, and apply it to the empty spot. The sick, thus healed and supplied, looked at one another, and saw nothing in place of the severed organ; but, sure and very confident that the substitute organ was there and that it was inaccessible to the human senses, they did not consider themselves defrauded, and returned to their offices. I want no other proof of the effectiveness of the doctrine and the fruit of that experience other than the fact that all of Diogo Meireles' noseless people continued to provide themselves with the same handkerchiefs. What I leave here is related to the glory of bonzo and the benefit of the world. (ASSIS, 2011, p. 167-168)

By alluding to the “glory of bonzo,” the narrator points out what, in the tale, is substantially closer to the current situation – without the harmful consequences of the latter. This is the aforementioned foundation of the Bonzo Pomada hoax, whose resemblance to the notion of ‘alternative facts,’ uttered by an advisor to Donald Trump on the occasion of his inauguration in the US government in 2017, is irresistible.

Machado's story is also reminiscent of the well-known 19th-century tale by Hans Christian Andersen, entitled *The emperor's new clothes*, in which two swindlers manage to deceive an entire city by claiming to be great weavers of delicate garments whose fabric had the miraculous ability to be invisible to anyone who was foolish or unprepared for the position itself – which leads everyone to admire the new and metaphysical imperial costume until a child says: “but he's not wearing anything!.” In the kingdom of Bungo, it seems, there are no children who say: ‘but they don't have noses’! Instead, it is the opposite: the media, the bearer and disseminator of ‘alternative facts,’ convinces everyone that Titané's espadrilles are the best in the world!

The “graceful invention” of Diogo Meireles, however, while providing him with recognition as in other Pomadista's experiences, had the effect of curing a disease that befell the inhabitants of the city, causing them deformity and leading some to suicide. Here, the distance between the ethics of this deceitful doctor from the 16th century and that of the charlatans who were at the forefront of the metaphysical management, in Machado's sense, of the serious public health crisis that Brazil was going through in the early 2020s is

clear. Substitute Meireles' healthy noseless ones for those who lost their lives to scientific denialism², relying on ineffective medications and early treatments not authorized by science - sometimes even refusing the use of masks, concealers, and nose protectors, thus exposing and putting the noses where they shouldn't be – and we have a good idea of the teleological arc of the ethics of disinformation, which is revealed in multiple results that different disinformation practices can produce, as we will see later.

THE PANDEMIC DENIERS

Out of the 1,287 pages in the final report of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) on the Pandemic (BRASIL, 2021), just over two hundred make up the chapter “Disinformation in the Pandemic (fake news),” which addresses the structure of production and dissemination of false news listing the centers of action and their permeability with the government apparatus that exposes the use of the federal public administration for the dissemination of fake news.

Under the argument that “access to accurate and reliable information about the actual health risks presented by covid-19 is as important as any other protective measure recommended by health agencies” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 663), the report text concludes:

This dissemination of misleading communications, conducted by malicious people in favor of their own and hidden interests, causes great confusion and induces the population to adopt behaviors that make it difficult or even prevent the correct fight against the covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the fundamental premise of communication in the context of the pandemic is that “correct information saves lives” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 619).

Based on the findings made by the CPI, which include the documentation of posts on social networks (many of which were later deleted by their authors) and the selection of data demonstrating connections between the accounts of those involved on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, the report, signed by senators Omar Aziz, Randolfe Rodrigues, and Renan Calheiros, supports the proof of the existence of “an organization structured and divided into nuclei to act in the dissemination of disinformation” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 664-665). According to the document, these nuclei would include specific functions ranging from the strategic orientation of the actions carried out, “giving them guidelines and informing them of action priorities” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 667), passing through groups responsible for financing and promoting posts on digital media on the one hand, and political support for the organization's decisions on the other, encouraging people “to non-compliance with the health standards imposed to contain the pandemic,” and even adopting “conducts of incitement to crime” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 669). In the so-called “fake news production and dissemination center” would be those responsible for the “dissemination of false news or with content that hinder the treatment of covid-19” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 673). It is in this last group, among politicians, digital influencers, and conservatives from the government base, that would be the denialist doctors – the public health “pomadistas” of our time.

If the participation of doctors in the dissemination of disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic should be scientifically and ethically questioned, with the aggravating factor that these health professionals lend reliability to their speeches due to the authority they enjoy in the scientific field, even more, serious is the protagonist roles of a group of doctors and entrepreneurs³ from the company Prevent Senior – initially specialized in medical care for the elderly – in the “pomadismo” of early treatment of the virus based on

2 The recently released *Dicionário dos negacionismos no Brasil* by Kropf (2022, p. 201) emphasizes that scientific denialism “should not be seen as a result of ignorance, but, on the contrary, as responsible for deliberately producing it,” definition that is in line with the understanding of disinformation adopted here.

3 It should be noted that some physicians employed by the company refused to follow orders from their bosses. They denounced it to the CPI and suffered retaliation, as seen in Bittencourt (2021), Betim (2021) and Balza (2021).

‘metaphysical’ medicines, an expedient that cost the lives of part of their patients/customers. The seriousness of the case is evident in the more than one hundred pages of the chapter of the CPI report exclusively dedicated to the actions of that company – not by chance and subsequent to the chapter on disinformation.

Before entering the discussion about the ethics of disinformation, let us consider, at this point, the Platonic debate on ethics and politics in *The Republic* in which we read what Socrates would have said to Adimantus:

XXI - the true lie is hated not only by the gods but also by men. [...] And lying with words? When and for whom is it useful enough not to deserve hatred? Will it not be useful against enemies and in favor of those whom we call friends when, because of delirium or madness, they try to do evil? At that time, to ward off evil, does it not become useful as medicine? (PLATO, 2006, p. 82-83).

This is followed by the reflection that “if lying is really useless for the gods, while for men it is useful by way of medicine, evidently such medicine should be handed over to doctors and kept out of the reach of those who are not in the profession;” however, based on the analogy between a doctor and a ruler, seen as a doctor of the polis, it would also suit the latter “to lie to benefit the city, or because of enemies or citizens, but such a resource should not be available to others” (PLATO, 2006, p. 92). According to Lafer (2007), such an analogy between doctor and ruler has become a “rhetorical commonplace – *topos* – of political argumentation,” legitimizing the “*ex parte principis* perspective based on the wisdom and knowledge of rulers who can, thus, place duties for the governed” (LAFER, 2007, p. 319-320).

The Machado character of the doctor Diogo Meireles, with the idea of metaphysical noses, seems to update the Platonic argument that good doctors and good rulers can and should lie for the good of the people. In fact, concerning the field of bioethics, there are cases in which lying is authorized by doctors and health professionals to alleviate suffering or promote beneficial treatments to patients – Macedo (2020) collects, in the bioethics literature, technical terms of medicine such as “therapeutic lie,” “pious lie,” “pact of silence,” and “therapeutic privilege” while Lafer (2007, p. 326) cites the expression “charitable lie.” None of these terms, however, apply to the group of Prevent Senior physicians denounced in the Pandemia CPI; on the contrary, the purpose of their denialist actions and disinformation practices suggests the opposite vector to that of interest in the health of their patients whose truth about the severity of their health conditions was hidden by these doctors who are also responsible for prescribing metaphysical cures⁴ that in some cases led people to death (AGÊNCIA SENADO, 2021).

It is at this point that we must remember the epistemological difference between truth/error and the ethical difference between truth/lie (AGOSTINHO, 2019; SCHNEIDER, 2013). In the latter case, lying means saying something to harm the other (whether justified or not); the same goes for telling the truth (epistemologically) and speaking the truth freely (*parrhesia*) to make manifest what others try to hide.

The expression “true lie” (*alethos pseudos*) is an oxymoron used by Plato (2006) to characterize lying as ignorance, as opposed to lying in the usual sense, which is saying something false that can be useful in certain situations, or circumstances. This difference between truth/falsehood (or ‘true lie’) and truth/lie (with the intention of influencing someone or something) is important; in modernity, morality is concentrated in this last sense (more usual for Plato). He who lies deceives the other, but not necessarily himself. He knows

4 In testimony to the CPI, lawyer Bruna Morato, representative of the 12 Prevent Senior doctors who, in compliance with medical ethics, denounced the shady practices of the company’s denialist doctors, states: “what they explained to me was the following: there is an interest of the Ministry of Economy that the country does not stop, and, if we enter into this lockdown system, we would have an intense economical hit, and, therefore, there was a plan so that people could take to the streets without fear. [...] And that hope had a name: hydroxychloroquine” (BRASIL, 2021, p. 897).

he is telling a lie, but he communicates it as if it were the truth. For Plato, this “moral” fault is less serious than believing a lie (CAPURRO, 2020)⁵.

This hierarchy, which gives primacy to lying as an error overlying with a practical purpose, is truly Socratic: the true lie would be ignorance of the truth (or of ideas), while the other ‘little lies’ would be less serious. The problem, in the case of scientific denialism of the covid-19 pandemic, is that this difference is diluted in digital media in such a way that what is communicated as false is disseminated as a ‘little lie’ in a global and massive way in order to become increasingly difficult to differentiate the true from the false.

Pomadistas of the pandemic said the virus was fake, a ‘little flu’; they lied, and now they have to say that it was a ‘true lie,’ that is, saying something false. One cannot believe that the problem that led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Brazilians will be solved with lies.

Bringing the Platonic reflection on the use of a lie as similar as possible to the truth to our pandemic time, which would make it useful as if it were a kind of medicine, lead us to think of the BionTech/Pfizer vaccine as artificially constructed to resemble the coronavirus. If we think of the platonic government/doctor analogy, the vaccine would be a lie/fake, as it does not use the virus itself but mimics its structure to deceive it, with a function based on the body’s message system (messenger ribonucleic acid - mRNA). In a biological

context, however, it makes no sense to talk about truth/lies – for the doctor who prescribes the medicine for the patient who uses it or for the government that promotes it (or, intentionally, fails to promote it).

We can also think, in a language less attached to scientific grammar, in the invention of the ‘Sugar Book’ in 2004, which the more people consume, the more bitter it becomes Zuckerberg’s Facebook. The creator of this mountain of digital sugar – more addictive than Coca-Cola, thanks to its proprietary narcotic ingredients, such as the cocaine that was once in the formula of the famous soda – now invents a sweet META-physical realm that claims to be free of lies – a statement that does not withstand the scrutiny of the disinformation content that circulates (and generates profit) on its digital platforms (ZUBOFF, 2020).

There have been others who have forged these sweet kingdoms. At first, sometimes without interest, but over time giving in to the temptation to do business with this invention, seeking to turn an opinion into truth. The META realm (or meta-realm) seems to be free for everyone, except for payment with personal data (BEZERRA, 2015). The appropriation of these data by technology companies, which extract them to operate the algorithmic targeting of (dis)information, is a topic dear to the ethics of disinformation that we propose as a field of study.

PROLEGOMENA TO A STUDY OF THE ETHICS OF DISINFORMATION

Information ethics is a field of study that has its *stricto sensu*⁶ origins in library science at the end of the 1980s, problematizing themes such as privacy, censorship, access to information, intellectual freedom, and copyright; later, it gains importance in areas as diverse as technology, media, global humanitarianism, and philosophy of information (BIELBY, 2014). Research-based on information ethics covers, among others, questions related to the ethics of media, library, computers (cyberethics), and medicine (bioethics). In the latter case, it deals with information related to the use of technology in the field of biology and medicine and addresses topics such as abortion, organ donation, euthanasia, cloning, use of DNA, and fingerprints (HONGLADAROM *apud* BIELBY, 2014) and, more recently, in the use of big data with personal information (BELONI; BEZERRA, 2019).

5 It is important to emphasize that Plato did not see lying in the sense of influencing as something minor per se - see his criticism of the sophists. He just considered moving away from the ideal world (of ideas) to something more serious.

6 *Lato sensu*, its origins can be traced back to the very birth of ethics as a field of philosophical investigation, or even earlier, considering the Decalogue’s prohibitions against perjury and false witnessing.

If information ethics proves to be a broad and consolidated field of studies in different areas of knowledge (ICIE, 2020), would it be possible to speak of an ethics of misinformation? The idea may seem absurd given the pedagogical conception of “information,” which, according to the scholastic philosophy of Saint Augustine, would be that which educates and instructs – an attribute later conserved by the German language, in proximity to the term *bildung* (CAPURRO; HJORLAND, 2007, p. 157). Nevertheless, the understanding of “information” as “giving a (substantial) form to matter to communicate something to someone” (CAPURRO; HJORLAND, 2007, p. 158), which characterizes the transition from the use of the medieval concept of information for modernity, it allows us to understand that all in-formation means a risk of dis-information, as well as an explicit possibility of deforming something with the aim of harming someone. Therefore, ‘disinformation also informs,’ in the sense of giving form to something, even if that something is a ‘deformation’ of the truth - in other words, a lie. In this sense, the ethical debate on disinformation must scrutinize the lie and analyze the conditions and contexts in which its use can be justified from a moral point of view as a critical moment of any conceivable information ethics.

Understood by Lafer (2007) as a political problem that raises ethical dilemmas, the lie finds its justification in a pendulum that oscillates between an ‘ethics of principles,’ which corresponds to an ‘ethics of duties,’ as we see in the work of Kant, and an ‘ethics of ends’ that, “in balancing means and ends it would legitimize the ‘ethics of responsibility’ sustained by Max Weber as the ethics of politics;” thus, “politically, the full affirmation of an ‘ethics of principles’ means the ‘total reduction of politics to morality’ (LAFER, 2007, p. 324, emphasis added).

Indeed, the Kantian orientation (2002) of acting in such a way that your maximal persona should become a universal law certainly has force. However, the well-known illustration found in the booklet *About a supposed right to lie in defense of humanity* (1997), according to which a criminal should be told the truth if he asked if we knew where his victim was hiding is simply untenable. It is because it starts from a false assumption, which undermines the idea of the categorical imperative as a whole: the idealist assumption based on duty, indifferent to the fact that effectively everyone does not act like that, nor would they act, just because it would be rational in an abstract universal sense detached from the myriad of concrete mediations that make up life. In other words, it is a position that is indifferent to the particular mediations of the unique circumstances of life in its attachment to an abstract universal, which starts from an abstract man, from an individual abstracted from the history of societies, subject to the conflict between nature and reason without socio-historical mediation. At the opposite extreme, we would have the aforementioned ethics of responsibility, based on the practical results of action, problematized by Weber in opposition to the Kantian ethics of principles (COMPARATO, 2008, p. 291-295). The problem, in this case, is that, in the extreme, there are no more parameters to define the reason why this or that result is preferable because there are no more universal principles.

A possible solution to this contradiction between the ethics of principles and the ethics of responsibility – in which both have a reason, but insufficient reason and, therefore, are at the same time right and wrong, in themselves and their opposition – is the dialectical perspective that confronts singular concrete acts with universal principles and particular mediations. In a way, it is the one adopted by Brecht (2021) and Mandela (apud SCHNEIDER; BASTOS, 2021), who implement Koiré’s argument (1945), according to which ‘the lie can be a weapon of defense for the oppressed or, in broad terms, an instrument of social struggle.’

Brecht smuggled the pamphlet *The 5 difficulties in writing the truth into Hitler’s Germany*, whose false cover bore the title *First Aid Manual* to deceive Nazi censorship. The title was apparently untrue but essentially and pragmatically true; therefore, effectively, it could be considered as such in the midst of the info-communication war at the time, which made it true, even in semantic terms, for those who knew how to read it in context. The series of tricks adopted by Mandela and his prison comrades in writing, preserving,

and circulating the manuscript of Mandela's autobiography for publication, *Long Walk to Freedom*, written in Robben Island prison, make up an epic sequence of disguises and concealments of the truth in the name of truth: night writing, copies, miniatures, etc.

More than a millennium before these debates and episodes, Saint Augustine (2019) had already placed the lie in defense of the physical integrity, own or others, as a less grave sin than other modalities, among which the deliberate factual lies that generate benefit to the liar and evil to the neighbor. On the scale of contemporary disinformation operations, sociotechnically mediated by digital networks, 'the neighbor' involves entire populations and evil, death. At the end of the day, according to Lafer (2007), the defense of the criteria of exceptions to the rule when making the decision about lying or not (since lying, unlike the truth, requires justification) "normally takes into account a prudent evaluation of the results of these exceptions, thus provoking an interpenetration between the 'ethics of principles' and the 'ethics of results'" (p. 325, emphasis added) – hence our repeated concern, aligned with Aristotelian ethics with the 'teleological' dimension of the ethics of disinformation.

Another important set of Augustinian reflections on the subject is of an epistemological, aesthetic, and communicational nature when the author distinguishes factual and malicious lies from metaphors and other expressive ways of arriving at the truth, exemplifying the idea with both sacred and profane texts. For Augustine, the use of metaphors, metonyms, analogies, and other allusive figures of speech should not be confused with lies as they can refer to deep truths, albeit indirectly, stimulating reasoning and imagination:

[...] if we call all metaphors and symbols a lie – which cannot be taken in their literal sense, but only use them to make sense of other things, and therefore must be understood in an allegorical sense – then all [metaphors and symbols] would be lies, which cannot be acceptable. Therefore, those who think like this tend to throw this slander over all locutions and figures of speech. So, even the same metaphor, that is, the transposition of a word from its proper meaning to another figurative one, would also have to be called a lie. As when we say: the waves of the plowing, the vines [that sprout] buds, the flower of youth, the hair of snow. Undoubtedly, we do not find waves, gems, flowers, or snow in those things we refer to; we only transfer [the sense] from other words to them, so they should not be thought of as lies. [...] These truths are hidden, under symbolic veils, to excite the pious spirit of the investigator, and are not degraded by presenting themselves naked and evident. For even if we learn them elsewhere, openly and manifestly from other passages, in this case, as we discover their mysteries, they seem to be reborn in our understanding in a sweet and renewed form. The fact that they are obscure things does not prevent the scholar from unveiling them; on the contrary, it makes them more interesting because they are mysterious, they instigate the desire with more ardor, and, thus, we reveal them with greater pleasure. In any case, these metaphors say things that are true and not false, for they mean true things, whether in word or deed: what they mean is what they say. (AUGUSTINE, 2019, p. 81-82).

Returning to our era and incorporating yet another element to the debate, Hannah Arendt (1968) discusses the distinction between factual lies and logical lies, arguing that the first type is perhaps the most dangerous since scientific and philosophical truths could theoretically be reworked with less difficulty than historical truths in case testimonies or records are lost or deleted. Deletion – through the destruction of documents and people – and the rewriting of factual truth become a current practice of the constituted powers, we have what the author characterizes as totalitarianism.

In this compound analytical key, fiction only deserves to be assimilated to lies when used as a resource for ideological manipulation aimed at perpetuating class, gender, ethnic, racial, or combined oppression. Machado's fiction analyzed here, however, is the opposite of this because it resorts to fantasy to reveal the truth of the historical lie in the dialectical movement of negation of negation: the singular adventures of the various liars in the story (lie 1) compose in the form of of a fictional whole (lie 2) a realistic social critique of the particularities of Brazil at the time, allowing, in an allusive way, to better understand them in their historical effectiveness (truth). None of the characters historically existed in their concrete singularity, but

their particularities did, as types (LUKÁCS, 1968) of charlatans elaborated on very realistic bases, which at the same time refer us to the universal notion of charlatanism. But they do so having the particular, the typical, as their point of arrival, which characterizes good realistic art, still according to Lukács (1968), which has the particular as its point of arrival in the dialectic of the singular and the universal, unlike science and philosophy, which has the universal as its point of arrival, in inductive processes, or the singular, in deductive processes.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we draw attention to two curiosities of Machado de Assis' tale: the relatively innocent or even beneficial character (in the case of doctor Diego Meireles) with narrated charlatanism in its own fictional geographic and historical ruler, and its anticipatory character of national charlatanisms of the present, much less beneficial and innocent, if not the opposite. It is clear that Machado's text presents several elements that help us to problematize what is common to all eras and what is particular in each one concerning the confusion between fact and opinion. Above all, to the various sociotechnical stratagems linked to what, in rhetoric, is called ethical proof, referring to credibility, or rather, to the stratagems of social production of the credibility of the enunciator, the source of information, the messenger, or *angelos*, who can be a *pseudangelos*, as Capurro (2020) says. Among other considerations, in *Pseudangelia - Pseudangelos: false messages and false messengers in old Greece*, Capurro (2020) alludes to some criteria that the Greek polis used to determine the credibility of messengers: credentials, status, eyewitness testimony, and personal interest. Another contemporary information philosopher who discusses the serious problem of false cognitive authorities, lying individuals who gain credibility with broad sectors of the population, is Froehlich (2019). In all the disinformational practices referenced here, including those denounced by the CPI of the Pandemic and in many others that inhabit the social bosom, for good and for bad, admitting the breadth of the teleological arch of the ethics of disinformation collated here, we must ask, with the Greeks: who gains from it?

One of the ways in which the problem of contemporary disinformation must be faced involves a double analytical key, starting with the question of the credibility of sources, that is, the dynamics of the social production of cognitive authorities and pseudo-authorities (such as doctors and government officials) in articulation with critical scrutiny of the specific content of most of the disinformation and misconceptions in circulation, marked by reactionary, misogynistic, racist, homophobic and, at the limit, neo-fascist elements, a trojan horse of hateful affections that carries neoliberalism, who dares not to expose themselves. We ask, with the Greeks: who gains from this?

The corollary of all this is flat earthism, scientific denialism, environmental misinformation, anti-vaccine movements, and countless conspiracy theories, more or less dangerous, that are aired on digital networks and attract wide engagement thanks to the susceptibility of big tech algorithms, converting the healthy popularization of the distrust of authority characteristic of modern thought into a stodgy mix of ignorant, smug, lazy skepticism towards modern authorities – the rule of law, science, press – with passionate dogmatism towards those of the postmodern type – swashbuckling media politicians, internet pseudo-intellectuals, thousand of sects. We ask, with the Greeks: who gains from this?

A society in which the phenomenon of disinformation is normalized needs a strong dose of skilled knowledge and education, i.e., a Socratic *pharmakon*, but perhaps this is not enough – especially since, given the complexity of the current global polis, the 'little lies' of all kinds multiply and become 'normal' for good and for bad. There are no easy solutions for one type of lie or the other. Contemporary disinformation, therefore, requires a consistent and systematic updating of the debate around the interconnected ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of the dialectic of truth and lies. In other words, even if

we recognize, for example, the distinctions between lying as deliberate falsehood or as an unintentional mistake, or between factual, scientific, or philosophical truth, or even between metaphors, metonyms, fiction, opinion, evidence, etc., the extremes of bad faith or misunderstanding, on the one hand, and of good faith or the correspondence between understanding and things on the other, they cannot be ignored in their formal structural opposition, even if in a historical and intercultural perspective, under the risk of losing any shared parameter of reality. About the risk of this loss, we ask, with the Greeks: who gains from this?

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