TRUTH IN THE PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC REALITY. MORAL AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

In this essay I examine the importance of truth in society and public life. I adopt the Polish perspective, which, however, can also be considered in universal terms. Polish experiences are a kind of exemplification here, which I refer to quite briefly so as not to obscure the main theme, which is the moral dimension of truth in social and public life. The pandemic, in turn, acts as a lens in which the phenomena related to the exercise of power by populists and the flood of false information focus. Paradoxically, it also creates an opportunity to overcome the structures of lies and falsehoods. However, the future of truth in the post-pandemic world will not depend on random forces, but on a collective effort made to search for it, and on shaping the right attitudes and strengthening the institutional order that will foster freedom which is a necessary condition for truth.

Key words: pandemic, truth, politics

And no crying, and no screaming will convince us that white is white and black is black

Jarosław Kaczyński, Warsaw on 19-07-2006

INTRODUCTION

I started this essay with a slip of the tongue of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice and the United Right, who in his first speech, when assuming the office of prime minister in 2006, said these probably prophetic words. At that time he was a leader of the relatively moderate right - certainly by Central European standards, to become after a few years the leader of the right already referring to populism, and even to nationalist slogans. A party which has set power itself as its ultimate goal, which will pursue it also by means of lies or half-truths, which are clearly in opposition to the principles of logical thinking and facts themselves. Hence, this slip of tongue has proved prophetic. It has become an unmistakable sign of Polish right-wing populism, whose actions and declarations often collide with logic and facts, which has not only established itself as the most important political force in the country built since 2015 using also anti-democratic - I understand democracy as a system of values, and not only as election procedures – methods. This lapsus linguae has also taken root in the collective consciousness of a part of Polish society, becoming a system of thought and a pattern of collective action that accepts irrational attitudes, fears and stereotypes, affirming them as an expression of national pride and uniqueness. Truth, which is not only an epistemological category but also an ethical one, has been deprecated as a social value. Right-wing politicians have become its enemies - some perhaps involuntarily. For them the raison d'état has become the most important value, quite often equated with their own faction - how popular the slogan "for Poland!" has become, fitting in with relativism of so-called political realism, one of

the most important intellectual pillars of which is Hans Morgenthau, who in the collection of essays Truth and Power gave primacy to power [1970]. Also representatives of the Church are against truth and common sense, as for them the fear of otherness or of weakening the position of the institutions of the Catholic Church as a result of secularization or moral scandals is stronger than facts or the Truth of the Gospel; it is even stronger than the intellectual legacy of Karol Wojtyła – John Paul II, who is treated by many Poles in an almost idolatrous way, as an infallible moral and intellectual authority, yet whose ideas and views are in open opposition to the politics created by the ruling right. Of course, not all Catholic priests and intellectuals, including those representing the conservative wing in the Church, resonate with right-wing populism, on the contrary, many of them demand truth, including truth that would undermine the authority of the hierarchs [Terlikowski at all. 2020]. There are also such clergymen as the professor of the Catholic University of Lublin, Alfred M. Wierzbicki, who risking their careers and exposing themselves to environmental ostracism, loudly oppose the policy of the ruling party that discriminates against and stigmatizes LGBT+ people. Nevertheless, the current Catholic mainstream in Poland seems to authorize the narrative of the ruling right wing, and thus increasingly distances itself from facts, logic and common sense, not to mention the Truth of the Gospel, which should be a moral compass for them. I am not going to judge here whether Catholic hierarchs are compelled to this by cynical calculation, or just intellectual shortcomings, or maybe naive faith in the honesty and goodness of "ours". In any case, the participation of representatives of the institutional Catholic Church in Poland in the creation of irrational narratives is simply a fact, as evidenced by numerous statements of priests and bishops, as well as their secular acolytes.

I am writing my article from the Polish perspective, which is why I will refer to Polish experiences related to the pandemic and not only to the pandemic. Also on purpose, in connection with this "Polish perspective", I will quote mainly Polish authors. However, I will not be able to avoid the classics of the topic, including John S. Mill and Hannah Arendt. The pandemic will act rather as a lens here focusing complex problems associated with the exercise of power by populists, or at least by people using the populist narrative and the popularity of populist slogans in society. I am not going to analyze individual statements or particular political decisions and actions; this is not a research paper or even a review article. The Polish perspective does not exclude universality here. Universal tendencies appear in specific places, thanks to which they are enriched with local contexts.

It is an essay, so I use a looser form of expression, and I do not avoid judgments formulated on the basis of my own thoughts and observations and not on empirical research. I believe my text can be treated as a subjective opinion, my personal point of view or my interpretation. This is usually the nature of an essay, this is a feature of the humanities to a large extent. However, my intention is always to strive for objective truth, which, however, a subjective statement does not negate *ex definitione*. Simply put, I can say that I am going to speak subjectively about objective truth and about a subjective, or rather intersubjective, attitude towards this objective truth.

PONTIUS PILATE'S SKEPTICISM AND ITS MORAL CONSEQUENCES

The question – what is truth? that was supposedly asked by Pontius Pilate, governor of the Roman province of Judea, almost two thousand years ago, when questioning Jesus of Nazareth, is perhaps the most widespread example of the relationship between politics and ethics, because as I mentioned above, truth is not only epistemological category, but it has ethical consequences, and thus affects the practical sphere, is related to human behavior, it is particularly important in the aspect of

interpersonal relations, which may be based on truth, which creates trust and is a condition of honesty, or a lie - which is a strictly ethical category, as opposed to falsehood, which is a morally neutral concept - which can cause suspicion, pathological asymmetry in the relationship, leads to distrust and causes fears. Before Pilate formulated his question, however, Plato was considering the place of Truth in the public sphere several centuries earlier. He saw it in relationship with Good. Cognition, the aim of which are truth and action, leading to good create unity. Good is cognition or knowledge, and the proper and final end of cognition is Good (Republic, XVII). Therefore, we see in Plato the moral dimension of cognition and truth, which Michał Heller recalls in his interesting essay Moralność myślenia (Morality of thinking). A human act – actus humanae is always a consequence of a thought, but at the same time the thought itself is that act. The source of our morality is our thinking. It can be rational and lead to good things, and the goodness of thoughts is wisdom. Or vice versa, a bad thought leads to bad deeds and is an expression of stupidity [2017: 10-11]. A rationally thinking and acting person is guided in his life by truth, he wants to know truth and act in accordance with truth. As we can see, truth, being an ethical category, has a very practical dimension here, it concerns human action, including action involving the public sphere. We can therefore treat truth as a certain task. Because getting to know truth, i.e. recognizing the moral value of actions - because we operate on the basis of ethics and we are not interested in morally indifferent actions in this place – is not a trivial and relatively simple procedure, like recognizing the flavors of dishes or the colors and smells of flowers in the meadow, which also, of course, to some extent is related to truth or falsehood of judgments, but without moral consequences. Looking for truth requires inquisitiveness, often courage and self-criticism, i.e. the readiness to verify one's own or one's own group of views, intellectual effort and, ultimately,

loyalty to the learned truth - if we get to know truth, we must

be faithful to it. Pilate's skepticism, which is not a Cartesian methodical doubt, is merely an attempt to avoid responsibility. He was confronted with truth - human truth and Truth in the ultimate, divine dimension, if we accept the theological interpretation - but he rejected this truth for his own convenience, for purely conformist reasons. We discern moral consequences of truth is his stand. Pilate is a symbolic figure here. It symbolizes all those who turn away from truth which often requires heroism and resisting the evil that is a consequence of a lie. History knows a whole lot of Pilates who do not accept truth for their own comfort. Hitler's or Stalinist genocide took place with the tacit participation of millions of Pilates who preferred not to know or accept the truth in order to ease their conscience. These are perhaps the most drastic examples of the attitude symbolized by Pontius Pilate in modern history. Ignorance liberates from a sense of responsibility; it is an attitude typical of a passer-by averting his gaze from a man lying on the street. Since I cannot see the other's misfortune, I am free from responsibility for him. Since I do not see the tragedy of another person, I do not have to participate in it. The difference between looking away from an individual's misfortune and the masses' deafness and blindness to the drama of social groups lies only in the scale. Global or regional crises generally affect hundreds of thousands or millions of people. The world in the face of the current pandemic is also full of Pilates, just as contemporary Poland is full of Pilates who turn away from truth, refusing to perceive the pathology of public life - abuse of power, also in the face of fighting the pandemic, political corruption, violence, not necessarily physical, towards individuals and social and professional groups or those escaping in so-called symmetrism, proclaiming that all politicians do the same. Truth is a moral category. Therefore, it is not morally indifferent whether we accept it or reject it, which does not mean that getting to know truth is an activity that does not require intellectual effort or the hardship of searching. Cognition is a process in which mistakes and errors often occur, which we will not consider in moral terms as long as there is no intention to mislead, that is, until a lie appears as deliberate manipulation. However, despite the difficulty of finding out truth, or perhaps thanks to this effort, it is a moral challenge, the goal our cognition should pursue, to which our action should be subordinated. It is a moral consequence of human rationality. As aforementioned Heller says: "rationality becomes the morality of thinking" [2017: 11].

DISCOVERING TRUTH AND TOTAL TRUTHS

Knowing truth does not mean getting at absolute and ultimate Truth. This kind of truth is rather an idea, a distant goal that we pursue. The road to it leads through discovering relative and variable truths. As Tadeusz Bartoś says in his "unorthodox" interpretation of the epistemology of St. Thomas Aguinas: "Due to the pluralism of the world, it is impossible to talk about the uniqueness and immutability of truth in it. One should rather talk about the endless gamut of truths that appear and disappear exactly as it is with beings and their actions [...]. Truth [...] is changeable because the world whose truth the human mind gets to know changes: something that was truth ceases to be truth when the state of affairs of which truth is an expression changes. [...] It is impossible to express one activity with only one truth. The multiplicity and variability of truths, as we can see, result from temporality: the past, present and future of action are reflected in the mind of man who creates for himself separate truths about the same action" [2010: 44-46]. Another reason for the multiplicity of truths is also the multiplicity of intellects. The classic definition of truth - veritas est adequation intelectus et rei presupposes the existence of the cognizing subject - the intellect. And although the definition refers to adequation, this adequation is not an exact carbon copy, a representation of things in the human intellect, but only a non-contradiction between a thing and its representation in the mind. The level of adequation will depend on many factors, both endo- and exogenous with respect to the subject: ranging from human intellectual efficiency, heightened senses, and character traits, to a tool enabling a precise observation and description of the object of cognition. There is no "collective mind", only pluralism of intellects, autonomous individuals who in their own way discover truth or truths about reality [Bartoś 2010: 45-46]. This is by no means the consent to cognitive anarchism or nihilism. One must, however, recognize the human handicap in the process of getting to know truth. This process should be continual, just as our moral improvement should be. Also in the public sphere, referring to Platonic thought, learning Truth is in fact getting to know Good, that is, finding the best solutions for the functioning of the community. This constant movement towards truth was perfectly summed up by Karl Popper, who spoke of man as a "seeker" and not an "owner" of truth.

Such an attitude protects us from totalization and affirmation of total truths. Total truth is, in fact, pseudo-truth, i.e. a lie that appears in the public sphere and pretends to be absolute and ultimate truth, to which social values and principles are subordinated. Total truths took their fullest form in totalitarian political regimes. In totalitarian conditions, there is no room for doubts, for creative disputes with arguments, or progress, because the goal has already been achieved. Man is required to completely subordinate to "truth" [Modrzejewski 2005]. While truth, about which we can say that it is truth without any adjectives, needs, as argued by the classic of liberalism, John S. Mill, freedom, a free space in which it emerges from endless discussions and searches. *Total* truths also appear in democratic conditions; both extreme views and misunderstood political correctness lead to them. The media, including the so-called social media, let alone political propaganda are not free of them.

What makes people succumb to total truths? Quoted Michał Heller points to the tendency to irrationality inherent in people, which leads to the choice of illusions in place of truth; affirmation of illusions is simpler, does not require intellectual effort and self-discipline, as in the case of taking the side of rationality [2017: 41]. It is easier to refer to certain knowledge provided by folk wisdom than to trust a science which more often errs than gives a definitive answer. But how does it happen that not only individuals but masses yield to irrational delusions? Hannah Arendt, a philosopher and researcher of the phenomenon of totalitarianism gave an answer to this question in her work The Origins of Totalitarianism. She noted that masses "do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably parts of (...) what the masses refuse to recognize is the fortuitousness that pervades reality. They are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate coincidences by inventing as all-embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident. Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency" [1962: 351-352].

Total truth, or rather its establishment, as we cannot talk about searching, is a dead end street; it does not contribute to good in an individual or collective sense, nor does it bring us closer to absolute truth. It is only its illusion, and like any illusion it can deceive and seduce with its simplicity and apparent certainty. There are no nuances in it, which is read as a lack of self-confidence. Total truth explains everything literally, it simplifies reality in an almost vulgar way. It appears where there is no readiness for cognitive effort or conditions for taking it; where

there is no space for dialogue from which truth emerges. It is an

efficient propaganda tool. With its help, it is possible to depreciate the value of individuals or entire social groups, point to public enemies, justify immoral and even internally contradictory decisions or actions. It means a plastic narrative adjusted to the current trend and in line with the interests of the exponent. A skilled propagandist can juggle it in any way, like the Orwellian *Ministry of Truth.* The recipients *stupefied* with it may not even realize that yesterday's white is today's black: the day before, you can make fun of people wearing masks, and the next day be indignant at those who do not wear masks on the street. Total truth is not verifiable, it is immune to criticism; it is seemingly unchangeable because the collective amnesia of its believers is conducive to it. Behind it there is the authority of the person or institution that makes it credible or forces obedience to it. Fiction becomes reality because the propaganda machine can properly create it, make it real in the minds of thousands or millions of recipients; it also infects minds through social networks. However, total truth promoted by the state and its bodies is much worse, because the aforementioned authority and institutions are behind it. Many Poles - it is difficult to clearly estimate how many – are not outraged by demoralization resulting from exercising power, taking advantage of it and ostentatious display of power, also during the pandemic; they are not infuriated by the stigmatization of professional groups (e.g. judges) or social groups (e.g. non-heterosexuals) by those in power and pro-government media, the treatment of refugees as potential terrorists and criminals, not shocked by hushing up sex scandals in the Catholic Church and a protective umbrella opened by state organs over the institution of the Church. These are the examples of microscopic total truths that take root in the minds of many. Are they dangerous? I will give the floor once again to outstanding Catholic philosopher and theologian Michał Heller: "rationality and irrationality are not just private matters. Irrationality wreaks havoc not only in one's own backyard; it is like a contagious disease: a lack of personal hygiene easily turns into an epidemic. And irrationality on a social scale is a real disaster" [2017: 42]. Today these words – without a trace of irony on my part - sound almost like a prophecy. We are grappling not only with the pandemic, but also with the accompanying wave of irrationalism. And I mean not only the rulers who cynically exploit the epidemic for their own political and economic purposes, but also masses seduced by conspiracy theories of various kinds, which are doing finer in times of crisis than ever before. No matter how hard scientists and experts are trying, no one will convince supporters of conspiracy theories and total truths that "white is white and black is black". The power of illusion is stronger than the most solid scientific argument or rational reasoning, stronger even than common sense. In Polish, this concept is translated as common sense, i.e. healthy reason, which is closely related to rationality, even more than international sensus communis. Because although common sense often stands in opposition to the results of scientific research, it evolves by assimilating the findings of science. Therefore, following it is understandable and rational. After all, not everyone and not in all areas of life is guided by scientific findings. Common sense and willingness to improve it are sufficient. It is irrational to run away from common sense, for example, to conspiracy theories or simple recipes of populism. Unfortunately, such an attitude is too widespread and, regrettably, leaders of states, including world and regional powers, are not free of it. It is therefore hardly surprising that ordinary people often succumb to the magic of total truths, irrational theses and ideologies, populism or conspiracy theories, if behind them there are a powerful state propaganda machine, social media with their enormous range of influence, or persons or institutions commonly recognized as moral authorities, like the Catholic Church in Poland with its hierarchy and clergy. Avoiding responsibility

for the search for truth has a psychological justification. Referring to an "authority" absolves us of this responsibility while ensuring inner peace. Do rational people not refer to the authority of science and scientists? The difference, however, lies is constant intellectual effort related to formulating questions, looking for answers, verifying them, self-criticism and the lack of final certainty which is perhaps one of the greatest challenges. Rational man realizes that his knowledge, like all scientific knowledge, is only temporal. It is much easier to live in a world of steadfast and constant dogmas, *total* truths, thanks to which our sense of security increases, and our world appears, if not stable, then at least understandable.

THE PANDEMIC AS A CHALLENGE FOR TRUTH

Two Polish scientists representing social sciences, Jarosław Górniak and Małgorzata Kossowska, argue on the pages of the opinion-forming Tygodnik Powszechny that the current pandemic produces not only negative social effects such as increased anxiety, aggression or rejection, but also that reactions to it can also be positive, e.g. increased empathy and solidarity or spontaneous willingness to cooperate, which in "normal" conditions must be initiated in some way [Tygodnik Powszechny, 2020, no. 38 (3715): 23]. It is a similar case with truth in the time of the pandemic. It is a time abundant in all sorts of ridiculous conspiracy theories and irrational claims that need not even be cited here as exemplification, because the Internet is full of examples. It is a time when we have a real flood of contradictory messages from the authorities and public agencies, often as cynical as the justification for the idea of postal presidential election in Poland, which, fortunately, due to its illegality and possible epidemic and legal consequences, did not take place. At this point I would like to devote some attention to the positive side, of course with regard to the question of truth which is the subject of my considerations. A pandemic, like any crisis

or cataclysm, has, I would say, falsifying properties. It simply exposes the lie that is the basis of not only false views, but also attitudes, behaviors and social structures. This usually happens in dramatic conditions, sometimes at the expense of many people's life and health. This is a very high price to be paid for freeing people from lies that exist in society as a whole. And we gradually get used to living a lie, as late Polish philosopher Wojciech Chudy noted: "Truth is like air, which we do not notice when we breathe easily", adding that "it becomes arduous when it is stifling and polluted. We do not notice its existence and need when we use it normally in social communication, in thousands daily activities and it is used as the means building community bonds. When we start to feel its shortage when social life is dominated by falsehood, lie, hypocrisy and violence, then a distinctive need for truth occurs" [2008: 4].

A cataclysm or a natural disaster speed up our reaction. We open our eyes and they grow wide with bewilderment, just like Winston Smith's, the hero of *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel*, that the reality in which we have lived has been a great hoax. The greater, the higher the degree of authoritarianism, totalization of social life and the presence of the aforementioned *total* truths. However, disasters or epidemics cannot be hidden in the long run, because they happen regardless of the will of the authorities, even the most authoritarian or totalitarian ones. The drama of the fight for truth was shown by the struggle of a young doctor from Wuhan, Li Wenliang (1986-2020), who was the first to alert the authorities about the epidemic threat posed by the new virus. He was persecuted by the police for this. His death has become a symbol of this drama. I mentioned Mill earlier on who emphasized the importance of freedom in the search for truth. We can also reverse the situation and remind us of the liberating nature of truth. Truth liberates. As another Polish philosopher Józef Tischner noted, analyzing the papal teaching of John Paul II, another Pole: "The more truth between us, the

more freedom between us" [2011: 218]. The classic of liberalism mentioned in this essay, John S. Mill, also wrote about the power of truth. He believed that "the real advantage which truth has consists in this, that when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances falls on a time when from favourable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it" (On Liberty, p. 29). With its inner strength, truth is ultimately capable of overcoming all sorts of barriers, both social and legal ones. However, before a turn to truth takes place in so-called collective consciousness, or in the consciousness of many individuals, often tragic events must occur that will shake this collective consciousness stuck in the shackles of false propaganda. Then a catastrophe or a natural disaster becomes like a catharsis in a Greek tragedy, it cleans the minds of illusions, of fiction that is accepted unwittingly. However, leaving this purification process to itself is certainly not the best strategy for building social relationships based on

However, leaving this purification process to itself is certainly not the best strategy for building social relationships based on the principle of truth. One illusion can be replaced with another. Some new conspiracy theory may take the place of propaganda theses. Thus, two fundamental things seem to be sine qua non conditions. Firstly, free space for truth. Secondly, education. When Józef Tischner, quoted a moment ago, wrote that "there is no freedom in being liberated from the value of truth," he immediately added that "no truth can become truth for man and of man, unless his freedom recognizes it as such" [2011: 218]. This adjectiveless truth requires freedom. Freedom and truth are in fact the obverse and the reverse. In the social and individual sphere they cannot exist separately from each other. In the case of an individual, this freedom can have a deeply internal and even hidden character when he is surrounded, for example, by totalitarian or authoritarian reality, and yet he maintains the

freedom of his mind, does not yield to totalitarian propaganda, the political fiction of authoritarianism. But in the case of society, freedom must have an institutional foundation if truth is to fulfill its social function. We are talking here of course about freedoms, above all about freedom of speech and freedom of the press (media) and religion contained in it, or as Mill wrote liberty of thought and discussion. Equally important is the attitude of the majority of society, and above all of its representatives, which was mentioned by the classic of liberalism cited by me so many times. It means refraining from stigmatizing debaters, we can also add political opponents as bad and immoral people (On Liberty, p. 51). It sounds all too familiar to a Polish reader. And although none of the sides of the Polish political dispute is free from this offense, for over five years the ruling majority and its leader have leveled the most severe moral accusations, which had never appeared in mainstream politics before, at both political opponents and parts of society that do not agree with the government's political action. For a non-Polish reader, it is worth recalling these insults: traitors, rascals, worse sort, thieves, animalistic elements, etc. In such circumstances, there is no room for dialogue, so, as Mill advised, it takes self-discipline to stifle emotions and the language of hatred in public debate. The question is whether self-discipline and only public condemnation, as he suggested, are sufficient?

The second important issue besides this free space for truth is education, which Mill also mentioned as a necessary condition for the full exercise of one's freedom. It is in fact so obvious that I will not elaborate further on the benefits of education at this point, I just want to highlight one issue. We live more and more in cyberspace. There we find true and false information. We will not get rid of moral dilemmas, including those related to the search for truth. Hence the need for media education and it is not about educating professionals, but responsible attitudes among media users. As noted by married Slovak media philoso-

phers Sabína Gáliková Tolnaiová and Slavomír Gálik: "We think that this education should lead us towards healthy skepticism in what we think is obvious and indisputable, and we should then be more active in our quest for the true, good and beautiful" [2020: 47].

CONCLUSIONS

My intention was to share my thoughts on truth in the public space. The pandemic and the post-pandemic reality, which I hope will emerge soon, provide an excellent opportunity to look at the value of truth, considered here in moral rather than epistemological terms. The paradox is that a pandemic can help truth – truth without any adjectives – or rather lead to revealing it in public life or, more broadly, in social life. Where truth is drowned out by intrusive propaganda, fake news, and all sorts of irrational conspiracy theories and claims, the pandemic exposes their false nature. It is like a kind of criterion of truth. And I do not mean the sophisticated theories of American pragmatism, but the individual and social experience of a tragedy that has shaken social structures overgrown with all kinds of lies and falsehood. Like someone who experiences a severe disease and realizes his mortality and finality, and thus rejects the illusion of immortality or eternal youth and vitality. A pandemic is such a collective boundary experience, it allows us to break away from the existing framework in which our consciousness is crammed. In short, it cracks or even breaks this framework. Of course, it is impossible to judge to what extent the post-pandemic world will be free from lies and falsehood. Certainly, new lies will replace old lies. It is only up to us, up to our individual and collective effort directed towards ourselves and outward, to determine the effectiveness of eliminating lies from public life. One thing is certain, for both the citizen and the scientist the truth should be a moral duty. Both of them are under the imperative to look for truth even when its absolute form is merely

an idea, an infinitely distant goal. Overcoming their handicaps, both the citizen and the scholar should never stop striving for truth. Only this attitude is the basis for honesty and justice, and without them there is neither real science nor just civil society. Lie and falsehood will always accompany us, it depends on us how much and how permanently we will succumb to their delusions.

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