Krisis
JOURNAL
for contemporary
philosophy

Propaganda, Politics, Philosophy: A Critical Review Essay on Jason Stanley's *How Propaganda Works* (2015) and *How Fascism Works* (2018)
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Review of

Keywords

DOI

Licence

Propaganda, Politics, Philosophy: A Critical Review Essay on Jason Stanley's *How Propaganda Works* (2015) and *How Fascism Works* (2018)

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Ever since Plato and the Sophists argued about the relations between reason and rhetoric, the topic of political propaganda has been at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition. Today, given the recent profusion of "misinformation" and "fake news", the topic is anything but diminished in importance. In his 2015 book *How Propaganda Works,* Jason Stanley pursues a primarily philosophical investigation of the phenomenon of propaganda in which he integrates a wide range of work from the fields of political philosophy, analytical epistemology, philosophy of language, and the social sciences. The book offers a thought-provoking analysis of how the phenomenon of propaganda interacts with ideology, inequality, and democracy. However, while Stanley succeeds in offering a timely analysis of some of the pressing dangers that contemporary liberal democracies face, his book is less original and deeply ambiguous in its conceptual taxonomy of propaganda.

Despite the relevance of the study of propaganda today, it has received little attention in recent philosophical debates. In the first chapter of his book, Stanley explains this shallow academic state of the art by appealing to a distinction that has become popular in recent moral and political philosophical discourse: the distinction between "ideal" and "non-ideal" theory. The reason for the lack of scholarly philosophical interest in propaganda Stanley locates in the presently flourishing "conception of normative political philosophy" of which the purpose is to describe "the normatively ideal components of an ideal liberal democratic state" (2015, 28). As Stanley notes, there is no propaganda in such an ideal state, where speech behaviour is presumed to be cooperative. It is a consequence of the constraint to ideal theory in mainstream moral and political philosophy – undoubtedly under the influence of John Rawls's resurrection of the field in the 1970s in an explicitly ideal theory fashion – that the topic of political propaganda has disappeared from sight.

Stanley aims to offer a welcome antidote to this tendency: his purpose is to think through what it entails to argue for the central social democratic ideals of freedom and equality in our actually ill-ordered and structurally exploitative (hence "non-ideal") societies. As he rightly recognizes, "political philosophy without social theory involves extreme idealization in the construction of its models" (2015, 31). As such, in Stanley's study of propaganda, it is the explicit aim to descend from the realm of ideal theory to the real-world social and political facts of human speech that is so often propagandistic, manipulative, deceitful, oppressive, or violent. In order to do so, he draws on the work of analytical feminism, which he says "has laid the theoretical basis" (2015, xvi) for the book, and critical race theory, to which he says he likewise owes "an enormous debt" (2015, xix). Stanley's aim to pursue a non-ideal theory makes of the book a praiseworthy initiative and – at least in its aspirations – a valuable intervention in contemporary analytical political philosophy, which indeed largely continues to engage in ideal theory.

Despite this hopeful stage-setting, however, Stanley nonetheless seems to revert to the practice of an ideal way of doing political philosophy in his ensuing analysis.

That is, he does think it is possible "to frame the problem of propaganda in terms of the *transition problem*" (2015, 29) – the problem within ideal political liberalism of "how to move from an actually flawed state guided incompletely by liberal democratic ideals to an ideal liberal democratic state" (2015, 29). This problem, however, only looms for ideal theorists and cannot be understood in inferential terms – this is one of the central claims of Charles Mills in his influential 2005 essay in which he criticizes ideal theory (Mills 2005). So, while Stanley cites approvingly from Mills's influential castigation of ideal theory, he fails to do justice to that very paper when it comes to the issue of the interrelationship between the two approaches. After all, Mills argues that the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory is *not* inferential (and thus not to be understood in terms of the transition problem). Instead, the revisionist enterprise of non-ideal political philosophy – the project that substantively rethinks what it means to argue for equal rights and freedoms in our structurally oppressive and exploitative historical and political contexts – cannot be satisfied within the domain of ideal theory as an extension of it (Mills 2005, 177).

This fallacy brings to the surface a deep tension in Stanley's overall project. On the one hand, it is his explicit aim to drive his energies towards non-ideal circumstances in which practices of propaganda, manipulation, exclusion, and oppression are pervasive. Yet, on the other hand, in his recourse to ultimately Kantian norms – distilled through Rawls and Habermas – of liberalism and communication to account for the question of why and how propaganda threatens our (nominal) liberal democracies, he turns out to be much more conservative. Stanley subscribes to the traditional philosophical distinction between "objective claims of reason [and] biased and self-serving opinion" (2015, xvi), and he adheres to the "truth-conditional, cognitivist picture" of language in his conceptualization of propaganda (2015, 126). He holds that this picture gives us an elegant account not only of what happens when communication succeeds, but also of what happens when it fails, such as in the case of propagandistic speech. This is what draws Stanley to the Rawlsian appeal to "reasonableness" as a norm that governs "public reason" as a way to account for propaganda in liberal democracies (see chapter 3) and to the Habermasian ideals of deliberative democratic deliberation to explain how perverted language can be used as a propagandistic mechanism (see chapter 4).

It is, of course, true that Rawls rejected philosophical foundationalism in pursuing a liberalism that is "political not metaphysical" and that Habermas put social theory centre stage in the project of political philosophy. Nevertheless, these sources manifest the ambiguity that runs through Stanley's analysis: Rawls and Habermas are clearly ideal theorists. It is well-known that Rawls's central question in *A Theory of Justice* is "what a perfectly just society would be like" (Rawls 1999, 8), and, analogously, Habermas's deliberative conception of democracy is built on the idea of *unobstructed* rational debate between well-informed citizens. This debate takes place in what Habermas has called the "ideal speech situation" in which only "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas 2001, 94–95) will prevail. The critique of non-ideal theorists levelled against these constrictions in the study of justice and democratic legitimacy is that they *idealize* actual real-world human political and linguistic behaviour, thereby being counterproductive when it comes to their shared hopes, as politically engaged theorists, to achieve

concrete social justice and actual democratic debate. By forging his account of propaganda on the ideal principles of liberalism and social democracy that undergird the philosophies of Rawls and Habermas, Stanley makes himself vulnerable to the critique of non-ideal theory with which he at least putatively sympathizes. He first applauds the critical principles of non-ideal philosophy, but then regresses to the old-fashioned theoretical apparatus of ideal theory in his analysis of propaganda. Hence my main critique is internal: he fails to practice what he preaches.

This ambiguous theoretical-methodological background has repercussions in Stanley's central analysis of propaganda. Today, this word has a clear pejorative connotation. It may seem as if this moral connotation is exhibited in Stanley's introductory chapter, where he connects it to "manipulation" and "political rhetoric" (2015, 4), as opposed to reasoned argumentation. Likewise, it seems to be in this fashion that he writes that propaganda poses an "obstacle to the realization of liberal democratic ideals" (2015, 19) and that he closes the book by stating his hope that his book will "play some positive role" (2015, 294) in preventing propagandistic subversion of democratic ideals. If one studies Stanley's conceptual typology of propaganda carefully, however, one finds that it does not allow solely for a negative connotation. He characterizes the practice of political propaganda in general terms as *"the employment of a political ideal against itself"* (2015, xiii). But this definition does not say anything about the desirability of the ideal involved. Stanley thus construes a conception of propaganda that is morally neutral, thereby opening up the space for occurrences of *good* as well as *bad* propaganda, and as he later confirms: "my characterization [of propaganda] is perfectly general" (2015, 41).

Suppose one must think of an instance of political propaganda that accords with Stanley's definition. In that case, one will probably come up with something like an invocation of liberal and democratic ideals that are meant to disguise a practice that is, in reality, illiberal and undemocratic: one which appeals to freedom in the service of a goal that tends to undermine freedom covertly, for example. (Stanley gives the example of an appeal to "scientific experts" in order to wrongly suggest that climate science is awash in uncertainty; (2015, 60)). This is what Stanley demarcates as "the most basic problem for democracy raided by propaganda"; that is, "the possibility that the vocabulary of liberal democracy is used to mask an undemocratic reality" (2015, 11). But since Stanley's characterization of propaganda is in itself perfectly general, it allows for propagandistic practices that are corrosive not only of presumably attractive ideals (such as freedom or equality) but also of presumably unattractive ideals (such as obedience or domination).

Stanley surely is aware of this point, and to illustrate it, he narrates how W.E.B. Du Bois calls on propaganda "to win the respect, empathy, and understanding of whites" (2015, 38). Propaganda is understood here as an emotional mechanism that bypasses reason ("rational deliberation" [p. 12], "the rational will" [p. 48], or "autonomous decision" [p. 49]). Additionally, he reproduces an interesting interpretation of John Coltrane's jazz version of the famous Christmas song "My Favorite Things" from the film *The Sound of Music,* which is described as an "iconic cinematic celebration of whiteness" (2015, 64). Stanley writes that "Coltrane takes the song and gives it a powerful subversive twist, presenting a white aesthetic ideal in a fashion that subverts

it to reveal Black experience and Black identity" (2015, 65). According to his own definition, as he acknowledges, this is an instance of propaganda; Coltrane employs the aesthetic ideal of whiteness against itself. As Stanley later writes about this example: "in some sense, this is misleading" (2015, 114) and therefore propagandistic. This shows how propaganda can be used for bad as well as for good purposes. To change people's minds, irrespective of whether they hold morally approbative or disapprobative ideals in high esteem, sometimes some form of manipulation will be helpful. In Stanley's words, "It is hard to see how direct challenges to the ideals will be effective" (2015, 66) and he argues, *a fortiori,* that in our non-ideal circumstances propagandistic rhetorical strategies are even a prerequisite for achieving the liberal democratic ideals of freedom and equality for all (2015, 115).

Stanley's conceptualization of propaganda contrasts with what he sees as the "classical sense" of propaganda, defined as *"manipulation of the rational will to close off debate"* (2015, 48). By definition, this moral understanding of propaganda goes paired with the idea that propagandistic speech violates the Kantian norms of discourse, which consist of the assessment of *reasons* as the ultimate justifying source of knowledge. But paradoxically, as I indicated, this is the model of normativity (or at least the Habermasian version of it) which Stanley himself employs throughout his defence of liberal and deliberative democratic communication. Stanley slides into murky waters here. If there is good and bad propaganda, there is no *a priori* way to decide which propagandistic practices we should condemn as morally *bad* and which should we praise as morally *good*. Nevertheless, Stanley does try to distinguish between democratically unacceptable propaganda (what he calls "demagoguery") and democratically acceptable, or even democracy-enhancing, propaganda (what he calls "civic rhetoric") (2015, 82). In his typology, propaganda undermines democracy if its purpose is to support what he calls "flawed ideologies" (2015, 5) and "flawed ideological belief" (2015, 179). This, in turn, suggests that he believes that not all ideologies or ideological beliefs are flawed, and indeed, he holds that, like "propaganda," the notion of "ideology" is also morally impartial. He thereby aims to delineate a revisionist concept of ideology which can be both true and false. Contrary to how the concept of ideology came to be understood in the Marxian "critical theory" tradition as perforce epistemically deficient, Stanley thus forges a revisionist conception of ideology as a set of beliefs, values, and norms that can be both true and false. However, this only changes the question of how to distinguish between good and bad propaganda *into* how we may decide what makes certain ideologies and ideological beliefs flawed.

Since Stanley characterizes ideological belief (both true and false) by "its resistance to rational revision" (2015, 187), the criterion of correctness for an ideology is not just the extent to which it resists bypassing deliberative ideals. Rather, Stanley seems to believe that this criterion lies in the extent to which ideological belief either *enhances* or *erodes* susceptibility to rational argumentation. As he pictures it: while pernicious demagogic speech employs flawed ideologies "to cut off rational deliberation and discussion" (2015, 47), civic rhetoric "can repair flawed ideologies, potentially restoring the possibility of self-knowledge and democratic deliberation" (2015, 5). The idea is that whereas demagoguery *decreases* our susceptibility to the deliberative democratic norms

of discourse that consist of giving and asking for reasons, civic rhetoric *increases* this susceptibility. (As we have seen in the Coltrane-case, in our non-ideal circumstances, the circumvention of rationality is even a necessity for the advancement of liberalism and social democracy: "There is a structural problem in certain imperfectly realized liberal democracies that necessitates civic rhetoric" (2015, 115)). The synthetic dependency of the correctness of an ideological belief on our resulting susceptibility to reasons suggests that Stanley believes that the knowledge about this correctness, if ever, comes only *a posteriori*. But this renders his analysis self-contradicting, for the latter belief radically contravenes the Kantian framework (in which Rawls and Habermas postulate their theories) in which ideological belief and propagandistic speech are *a priori* violations of the rational will. Stanley's analysis begs the question here: he aims to defend the ideals of liberalism and democracy by warning of the threat posed by harmful propaganda (demagogic speech), which in turn is being warned about by appealing to the ideals of liberalism and democracy.

It is my contention that at the heart of Stanley's conceptual taxonomy there is a fork in the road that he neglects. Either propaganda and ideology are understood as non-moral phenomena, making them qua philosophical phenomena impossible to pin down without circular reasoning – then, there is no fruitful way in which we can distinguish between propaganda and ideology on the one hand and the use of reason on the other. Or, the alternative route, adopting an understanding of propaganda and ideology as pejorative terms for morally bad phenomena, which are so, then, on the Kantian philosophical basis that renders propagandistic speech a moral violation because it is a tool that by definition bypasses rationality. Stanley ambiguously shifts between these alternatives: he does at least claim to employ the terms "propaganda" and "ideology" as morally impartial, while simultaneously, paradoxically, in his delineation of what distinguishes bad propaganda and flawed ideological belief from good propaganda and correct ideological belief, he relies on the principles of reasonableness and democratic deliberation that preclude moral neutrality of these very phenomena. (It is interesting to see, if only briefly, what happens when we do justice to the supposed neutrality of propaganda that Stanley initially purports to conceptualize. Then, the concept's utility disappears, for there would be no criterion to differentiate between propaganda and the use of reason. Perhaps the conceptual void of the novelty of his definition of propaganda makes Stanley withdraw from it in his actual analysis).

For my present purposes it does not matter much that I believe the radical contingency of our theorizing practices renders a strict philosophical dichotomy between propaganda and rationality not very useful. (This is what initially made me enthusiastic about Stanley's revisionist definition of propaganda). It is beyond the scope of this review to investigate the details of this revisionist belief, and where it leaves us is in combatting moral cynicism, political irresponsibility, harmful ideologies, and pernicious propaganda. As I said, my main critique addresses the internal inconsistency in Stanley's analysis. As it turns out, he does want to maintain a metaphysical distinction between propaganda and the use of reason. He asserts that his book is "about the nature of propaganda and propaganda generally, that is, about the *metaphysics* of propaganda" (2015, 76). He seems to believe this is what the ultimate rationale of his book requires:

to map how propaganda works and, more particularly, how demagogic speech is presently threatening our (nominal) modern liberal democracies. Obviously, this is not an original project; the old Greeks were already concerned about the endangerment of political stability by the exploitation of people's emotions. (This undergirds Plato's condemnation of a democratic form of government). Stanley is well aware of this, and as he admits: "[t]he argument of this book is not new" (2015, 192). Apart from situating the discussion in the context of the present century by using interesting recent empirical data and fascinating novel insights from the social sciences, Stanley contributes nothing substantial to the more than two-thousand-year-old philosophical conversation on the relations between reason and rhetoric.

Given the rarity of much-needed analysis of morally and politically significant real-world phenomena in recent academic discourse, the aspirations of Stanley's project are praiseworthy. Yet I am sceptical about how he pursues his analysis – that is, about whether it is possible to do justice to the phenomena of propaganda and ideology as in themselves morally neutral while at the same time cherishing the hope for construing a "metaphysics of propaganda" that helps to prevent the occurrence of these phenomena as subverting liberal and democratic ideals. It seems to me that we do not need Stanley's taxonomy of propaganda in order to be able to observe that societies with "flawed social structures give rise to flawed ideological belief" (2015, 179). This observation leads to the bold but important and pressing – yet again not really original – political argument that Stanley forges: that liberal democracy is so in name only if political equality is not supported by a fairer distribution of wealth. Based on a rich body of recent subject matter, especially from social psychology, Stanley persuasively argues that substantial material inequality leads to epistemic barriers to acquiring knowledge and to false legitimation narratives by the wealthy elite, thereby clearing the ground for effective democracy-undermining propaganda.

This overt political argument also informs Stanley's later work, in particular his 2018 book *How Fascism Works*. Most importantly, what he shows there is how fascist politics is not dependent on an institutionalized self-identifying fascism. It thus decouples a specific form of government from governing practices; "fascist politics does not necessarily lead to an explicitly fascist state" (2018, xiv). In this way Stanley is able to argue how fascist tactics are increasingly being employed by leaders in many Western countries that self-identify as democracies, in particular in the recent history of the United States. Besides propaganda, the fascist tactics Stanley distinguishes include the appeal to a mythic past, anti-intellectualism, unreality, hierarchy, victimhood, law and order, sexual anxiety, and a dismantling of public welfare and unity. What binds these tactics, Stanley insists, is the idea of a politics of "us" versus "them", or a politics of fear. Beginning where he left off in *How Propaganda Works*, his book on fascism is more social and political than philosophical, for it is written as an explicit warning against fascism, that is, "in the hope of providing citizens with the critical tools to recognize the difference between legitimate tactics in liberal democratic politics on the one hand, and invidious tactics of fascist politics on the other" (2018, xvii).

Stanley's work is engaging, persuasive, and beautifully written. Still, let me address two critical points about Stanley's political analysis, before commenting on its

broader relationship to his previous work. First, given Stanley's explicit contemporary political orientation, it unfortunately lacks a treatment of the recent information technology revolution. Stanley discusses the fascist tactic of spreading conspiracy theories and "fake news," but he neglects to reflect on the vital influence of the infiltration of big tech and social media which have transformed our social and political lives since the onset of the present century. It is hard to see how one can understand the political world today – in particular its (proto-)fascist tendencies – without seriously engaging with the enormous role played in it by big tech and social media platforms. (By contrast, in the same genre, David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends* (Runciman 2019) contains a much more in-depth engagement with the information technology revolution).

Secondly, it remains unclear to what extent the fascist tactics Stanley investigates strictly limit themselves to the realm of illiberal and anti-democratic politics. Consider, for instance, Stanley's comments on the fascist use of a mythic past as a weapon for political gain, which he opposes to a liberal democratic treatment of history as "faithful to the norm of truth" (2018, 19). Is this not somewhat naïve? Stanley's preferred non-ideal perspective would surely lead one to accept that there is at least a grain of truth in the (in)famous slogan "history is written by the victors." (It is worth noting here that Charles Mills's critique of ideal theory entails, crucially, that the common narrative of formal liberalism, and gender and racial equality, in fact contains a covert manifestation of illiberalism, and gender and racial injustices, by silencing the histories of patriarchal and colonial oppression in its theoretical apparatus). There is, of course, a difference between a biased portrayal of history – perhaps even unintentional and unconscious – and a historical fiction that is fully politicized. Nevertheless, Stanley could have done a better job in making clear when a society's dealings with its history turns from liberal to illiberal. The same goes for his understanding of academic expertise as a force of liberal democracy. The question arises, when does the defence of intellectualism turn into an elitist and undemocratic faith in technocracy?

Yet again, we ought to commend Stanley's generally practical orientation and his engagement with the vicissitudes of our non-ideal, real-world politics. Moreover, Stanley avoids running into explicit difficulties precisely because he keeps a safe distance from providing theoretical underpinnings of his ideal of liberal democratic legitimacy – there is no mention of Rawls and Habermas in the book. Nevertheless, it is clear Stanley's castigation of fascism assumes an ideal theory framework. Take, for instance, Stanley's description of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as "a powerful iteration and expansion of liberal democratic understanding of personhood to include literally the entire world community" (2015, xviii). The problems of ideal theory arise immediately. Let me try to illustrate this by drawing attention to a historical episode about a formative moment in the history preceding this Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After the First World War the victorious countries came together during the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) to set the peace terms for the defeated powers. Famously, out of the conference came the League of Nations. Although often considered to be a key moment of moral progress in the West, the creation of the League cannot be separated from what happened to the "racial equality clause" that the Japanese delegation proposed to include in the Covenant of the League of Nations. The clause reads as follows:

> The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of states, members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality. (Cited in Shimazu 1998, 20)

Because of the power play of the major so-called "Anglo-Saxon" powers – the American, British, Australian, and South-African delegations – the clause was rejected. This is telling: a clause that demands acceptance of one of the most elementary cornerstones of the ideals of a liberal democracy – racial equality – was *rejected* by the countries that are usually seen as those in the forefront of fostering liberal democratic politics. This raises a lot of questions, but what is most pressing now is to recognize how the standard story of moral progress of twentieth-century Western liberal democracy is deeply, and one may say ideologically, biased. As Mills forcefully argues throughout his work, in order to come to terms with how these racist practices have shaped our ideas of freedom, equality, and democracy, the first step is treating the contentious histories of these ideas no longer as incidental aberrations in the process of realizing liberal democratic justice, but as structural features of our very often illiberal and undemocratic and therefore unjust status quo. This is also what the episode from the Paris Peace Conference makes clear: the question of what it means to be free and equal in our so-called "liberal democratic" but *de facto* illiberal and undemocratic world must take priority in construing our anti-racism and our anti-fascism. Although Stanley intends to commit himself to this emancipatory aim in his critical analyses of real-world propagandistic and fascist practices, it is unclear what his picture of "liberal democratic personhood" in fact means. Precisely this obscurity makes his analysis suspect of covertly relying on a standard ideal picture of liberal democratic justice as the polar opposite of blatant fascism.

Another instance which reveals Stanley's tacitly ideal understanding of liberal democracy becomes manifest when we take a closer look at his seemingly uncontroversial claim that "[i]n a healthy liberal democracy, language is a tool for information" (2018, 54). What use is there in insisting on the assertive function of language, given the actual widespread perversion of this function through deceitful or manipulative speech behaviour? Instead, the question we should ask is not how language functions in a healthy (or ideal) liberal democracy, as Stanley does, but what language does in our unhealthy and non-ideal social and political lifeworld. Within non-ideal theory, the study of language must not be (tacitly) constrained by assuming a counterfactual Habermasian ideal speech situation, but instead it must focus on language as it in reality works, which is often to distract, mislead, manipulate, and exclude. The general question for non-ideal theory thus becomes: how do we foster freedom and equality for all given our widely ill-ordered social, political, and linguistic behaviour? (We may point to an interesting, though so far largely neglected, analogy here: within ideal theory, the neglect of the dimension of power in relying on an ideal understanding of communicative behaviour mirrors the neglect of the dimension of power in relying on an ideal understanding of political behaviour).

Returning to Stanley's project, we may conclude that the critique inherent in the framework of non-ideal theory makes clear that, in order to deliver what he

promises *as an advocate of non-ideal philosophy,* it is simply not enough to merely reiterate an ideal picture of the nominal liberal democratic understanding of personhood in contradistinction to the inegalitarian fascist understanding of personhood (see, e.g., also (2018, 97)). Until the non–ideal project of asking what it means to be free and equal in our often illiberal and undemocratic circumstances takes centre stage, Stanley's tools, which are meant to help us distinguish valid tactics in liberal democratic politics from fascist politics, will do only a part of the job at best.

Let me end by underlining that in our contemporary context of widespread cynicism in public and political debates, Stanley's warning against how certain forms of exploitation of ideals imperil our liberal and democratic institutions is welcome. However, as we have seen, the urge to provide philosophical foundations for this warning – in the tradition of Kant's views of the norms of successful communication as rational communication, thereby posing a categorical prohibition on the practice of propaganda – commits him to an understanding of propaganda as inherently democracy-undermining. This is directly opposed to his revisionist concept of propaganda by which he himself tries to replace what he saw as this classical sense of propaganda. Despite this ambiguity which runs through Stanley's recent work, his aim to advance a political philosophy that is socially informed merits praise. Though he remains faithful to much of the traditional analytical philosophical principles in his metaphysical codification of propaganda and his general defence of liberal democracy against fascism, his largely careful analysis of how invidious political practices erode our liberal and democratic institutions is an impressive accomplishment. Therefore, notwithstanding the conceptual problems embedded in the notion of "propaganda" that Stanley fails to solve, anyone who wants to better understand our increasingly corrupt world of public and political discourse would do well to read Stanley's recent work.

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Biography

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