SISSELA BOK

LYING

Moral Choice in Public and Private Life

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LYING

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Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation

A Strategy for Peace

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For Derek

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PREFACE

Over ten years have passed since this book was first published, in 1978. During that period, the issues of truthfulness and deceit have received considerable debate. I can no longer subscribe, therefore, to the claim I made in the Introduction, that those issues have received extraordinarily little contemporary analysis. Questions of truthfulness and deception are now taken up in classrooms as in the media and in scholarly literature. Codes of ethics, such as the 1980 "Principles of Medical Ethics" of the American Medical Association, have incorporated clauses stressing honesty.

More than debate, however, will be needed to press for changes in actual practices of lying, especially as those most tempted to engage in such practices find it easiest to ignore all hard questions about what they are doing. New examples have come to supplement those of Watergate and Vietnam and others mentioned in this book. In Wall Street investment firms, as among TV evangelists, in political campaigns, and in the interlocking schemes of the Iran-Contra scandal, we have seen how pervasive the resulting damage can be to those who lie, equivocate, and resort to innuendo as well as to their dupes. We have also seen the erosion of public trust as lies build up into vast institutional practices.

Rather than updating *Lying* to take these new developments into account, I have chosen to consider many of them in two

books published in the intervening years: *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (1982) and *A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War* (1989). In the first, I could do so while pursuing issues, such as that of self-deception and secrecy, that I had explicitly set aside in writing *Lying* in order to be able to concentrate on clear-cut lies. And in the second, I have incorporated constraints on lying and on excessive secrecy into a moral framework that can be shared by religious and secular traditions alike, and that is applicable both within and between nations.

—Sissela Bok
June 1989

INTRODUCTION

When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.

—St. Augustine, "On Lying"

Doth any man doubt, that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like, but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?

—Bacon, "Of Truth"

After prolonged research on myself, I brought out the fundamental duplicity of the human being. Then I realized that modesty helped me to shine, humility to conquer, and virtue to oppress.

—Camus, *The Fall*

Should physicians lie to dying patients so as to delay the fear and anxiety which the truth might bring them? Should professors exaggerate the excellence of their students on recommendations in order to give them a better chance in a tight job market? Should parents conceal from children the fact that they were adopted? Should social scientists send investigators masquerading as patients to physicians in order to learn about racial and sexual biases

in diagnosis and treatment? Should government lawyers lie to members of Congress who might otherwise oppose a much-needed welfare bill? And should journalists lie to those from whom they seek information in order to expose corruption?

We sense differences among such choices; but whether to lie, equivocate, be silent, or tell the truth in any given situation is often a hard decision. Hard because duplicity can take so many forms, be present to such different degrees, and have such different purposes and results. Hard also because we know how questions of truth and lying inevitably pervade all that is said or left unspoken within our families, our communities, our working relationships. Lines seem most difficult to draw, and a consistent policy out of reach.

I have grappled with these problems in my personal life as everyone must. But I have also seen them at close hand in my professional experience in teaching applied ethics. I have had the chance to explore particular moral quandaries encountered at work, with nurses, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, and many others. I first came to look closely at problems of professional truth-telling and deception in preparing to write about the giving of placebos.[1] And I grew more and more puzzled by a discrepancy in perspectives: many physicians talk about such deception in a cavalier, often condescending and joking way, whereas patients often have an acute sense of injury and of loss of trust at learning that they have been duped.

I learned that this discrepancy is reflected in an odd state of affairs in medicine more generally. Honesty from health professionals matters more to patients than almost everything else that they experience when ill. Yet the requirement to be honest with patients has been left out altogether from medical oaths and codes of ethics, and is often ignored, if not actually disparaged, in the teaching of medicine.

As I widened my search, I came to realize that the same

discrepancy was present in many other professional contexts as well. In law and in journalism, in government and in the social sciences, deception is taken for granted when it is felt to be excusable by those who tell the lies and who tend also to make the rules. Government officials and those who run for elections often deceive when they can get away with it and when they assume that the true state of affairs is beyond the comprehension of citizens. Social scientists condone deceptive experimentation on the ground that the knowledge gained will be worth having. Lawyers manipulate the truth in court on behalf of their clients. Those in selling, advertising, or any form of advocacy may mislead the public and their competitors in order to achieve their goals. Psychiatrists may distort information about their former patients to preserve confidentiality or to keep them out of military service. And journalists, police investigators, and so-called intelligence operators often have little compunction in using falsehoods to gain the knowledge they seek.

Yet the casual approach of professionals is wholly out of joint with the view taken by those who have to cope with the consequences of deception. For them, to be given false information about important choices in their lives is to be rendered powerless. For them, their very autonomy may be at stake.

There is little help to be found in the codes and writings on professional ethics. A number of professions and fields, such as economics, have no code of ethics in the first place. And the existing codes say little about when deception is and is not justified.*

The fact is that reasons to lie occur to most people

*Scholars in many fields have had no reason in the past to adopt a code of ethics. But some are now exerting so much influence on social choice and human welfare that they should be required to work out codes similar to those that have long existed in professions like medicine or law.

quite often. Not many stop to examine the choices confronting them; existing deceptive practices and competitive stresses can make it difficult not to conform. Guidance is hard to come by, and few are encouraged to consider such choices in schools and colleges or in their working life.

As I thought about the many opportunities for deception and about the absence of a real debate on the subject, I came to associate these with the striking recent decline in public confidence not only in the American government, but in lawyers, bankers, businessmen, and doctors. In 1960, many Americans were genuinely astonished to learn that President Eisenhower had lied when asked about the U-2 incident, in which an American spy plane and pilot had been forced down in the Soviet Union. But only fifteen years later, battered by revelations about Vietnam and Watergate, 69 percent of the respondents to a national poll agreed that "over the last ten years, this country's leaders have consistently lied to the people."[2]

The loss of confidence reaches far beyond government leadership. From 1966 to 1976, the proportion of the public answering yes to whether they had a great deal of confidence in people in charge of running major institutions dropped from 73 percent to 42 percent for medicine; for major companies from 55 percent to 16 percent; for law firms from 24 percent (1973) to 12 percent; and for advertising agencies from 21 percent to 7 percent.[3]

Suspicions of widespread professional duplicity cannot alone account for the loss of trust. But surely they aggravate it. We have a great deal at stake, I believe, in becoming more clear about matters of truth-telling, both for our personal choices and for the social decisions which foster or discourage deceptive practices. And when we think about these matters, it is the reasons given for deceiving which must be examined. Sometimes there *may* be sufficient reason to lie—but when? Most often there is not —and why? Describing how things are is not enough.

Choice requires the formulation of criteria. To lie to the dying, for example, or to tell them the truth—which is the best policy? Under what circumstances? And for what reasons? What kinds of arguments support these reasons or defeat them?

Since I was trained in philosophy, it is natural for me to look to moral philosophers for guidance in answering such questions and providing the needed analysis; for the choices of standards, of action, of goals, and ways of life, as well as of social systems, are the essential concerns of moral philosophy.* Is there, then, a theory of moral choice which can help in quandaries of truth-telling and lying?

Once again, the paucity of what I found was astonishing. The striking fact is that, though no moral choices are more common or more troubling than those which have to do with deception in its many guises, they have received extraordinarily little contemporary analysis. The major works of moral philosophy of this century, so illuminating in other respects, are silent on this subject. The index to the eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contains not one reference to lying or to deception, much less an entire article devoted to such questions.[4] Even if one looks back over the last few centuries, the little discussion which is to be found is brief and peremptory. And works in other disciplines—in psychology, for example, or in political science—most often approach problems of deception in a merely descriptive or strategic manner.

It is difficult to understand all the reasons why so few efforts have been made to analyze our everyday dilemmas

*One of the simplest and, in my opinion, best definitions of ethics is that of Epicurus, quoted by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), Book 10, Ch. 30: "Ethics deals with things to be sought and things to be avoided, with ways of life and with the *telos*." ("*Telos*" is the chief good, the aim, or the end of life.)

of truth-telling. The great distance which so often separates philosophers from applied concerns of any kind provides a partial answer. In philosophy, as elsewhere, professionalization has brought in its wake a vocabulary, a theoretical apparatus, and academic boundaries forbidding to outsiders and confining for those within. In part, also, the very background of truth and falsity against which lying must be seen has led many thinkers to set ever greater preliminaries to the moral questioning of situations where truth seems to be at issue. How can we even begin to probe such situations, they ask, unless we first know what "truth" means? In ethics, finally, attention has gone primarily to questions of meaning and theory quite remote from problems of concrete moral choice.

I have often had to go back, therefore, to the classical period and the Middle Ages for a more direct grasp of the questions central to this book: What *actual choices* should we make when we are wondering whether to lie or to tell the truth? And why? Issues such as whether to perjure oneself to protect a political refugee, or whether to feign worship of a hated deity in order to escape persecution, were once hotly debated among theologians and philosophers.* What remains of their debate may be fragmentary, at times unsystematic. But their writings are alive to us still; I have drawn on them often.

Some now look back with derision or impatience at the Stoics, the Muslim mystics, the Early Christian fathers, or the rabbis for their passionate pursuit of minute distinctions. Nevertheless, we have much to learn from these traditions. Without such groundwork, larger distinctions often blur, as they now have.

It is high time to take up once more this debate, set forth its contours, and try to bring to it a comprehensive treatment that is still lacking—one that will try to examine all the plausible factors and all the reasons given for

*Some of these writings are gathered in the Appendix to this book.

lying, and see whether they can be made to shed light on the choices we make, as individuals and in society. And it is important to see the debate in the contexts in which human beings confront such choices. I have tried, therefore, to use examples from literature, from private life, and from work. They are merely examples; many others will spring to mind. While completeness is obviously out of the question, the cases selected may shed light on the major kinds of lies, ways in which they vary, and excuses used for telling them. And the juxtaposition of examples from very different walks of life may help to remove them from the customary narrowly professional or personal perspectives.

These purposes are best served by concentrating on choices between truth-telling and clear-cut lying, rather than on other forms of deception such as evasion or the suppression of relevant information. If some clarity can be brought to questions about actual lying, then the vaster problems of deception will seem less defeating.

The main task will not be to produce a sordid catalogue of falsehoods and corrupt dealings, nor to go over once again what each day's newspaper reveals about deception in high places. Rather, I want to stress the more vexing dilemmas of ordinary life; dilemmas which beset those who think that their lies are too insignificant to matter much, and others who believe that lying can protect someone or benefit society. We need to look most searchingly, not at what we would all reject as unconscionable, but at those cases where many see *good reasons* to lie.

Chapters I to IV examine the nature of lying, how it affects human choice, and basic approaches to evaluating lies. Chapter V examines white lies to show why those approaches are inadequate. Chapters VI and VII consider in detail what circumstances help to excuse lies, and whether some can actually be justified in advance. Chapters VIII to XV take up in greater detail certain kinds of