

# Truth Or Consequences

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*LYING: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. By Sissila Bok. Pantheon. 326 pp. \$10.95*

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By JOSIAH THOMPSON

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**S**ISSILA BOK's voice is the voice of the moralist—sensible, analytically keen, cautionary—and her book is a work of applied ethics. Her questions are “should” questions: “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 recom-

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mendations 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 journalists lie to those from whom they seek information in order to expose corruption?” *Lying* is intended to loosen the conceptual tangles posed by these questions. As a book in applied ethics it is successful. But in being successful it exposes the limits of the genre.

Clearly some lies are permissible. A murderer looking for his victim may be lied to. On the other hand, the very nature of language requires the maintenance of what Bok calls the “principle of veracity,” the presumption that lies are (in Aristotle's phrase) “mean and culpable,” and always require a justification.

So we are left in the mid-ground with the question: When is it permissible to lie? This question, the axial one of the book, opens into a series of more particular questions: Is it permissible to lie to a liar? to an enemy? to a child? to an insane person? to the sick and the dying? Is it permissible to lie to protect a peer or a client? to advance a great public good? Bok pursues answers to these questions in sequential chapters. Alert to the complications of actual situations, she insists that ambiguity must not blunt or excuse what she takes to be morally imperative.

How satisfying are her answers? Consider the following:

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*ruption?* Here Bok uses as an example the deception practiced on Deep Throat by Woodward and Bernstein and described in their book *All the President's Men*. After waffling over whether Woodward and Bernstein's deception was necessary, Bok cautions: “What is more troubling in the book than the lies themselves is the absence of any acknowledgement of a moral dilemma. No one seems to have

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# Lying

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stopped to think that there was a problem in using deceptive means. No one weighed the reasons for and against doing so."

*Should professors exaggerate the excellence of their students on recommendations in order to give them a better chance in a tight job market?* "Those who give ratings," Bok recommends, "should make every effort to reduce the injustice and to come closer to the standard of accuracy which they would accept were it not for the inflated practice. But if one goes against such a practice, one does have the responsibility of indicating that one is doing so, in order to minimize the effect on those rated."

*Should physicians lie to dying patients?* As Bok points out, the physician here faces an ugly dilemma. In most cases, truthfulness yields large dividends for both physician and patient. With certain patients, however, the shock of such news might trigger a scientifically verified "dying response"—a "giving up" which can literally lead to death. Faced with a patient of the second type, the physician clearly *ought* to lie. But how is he to know? There really is no way.

The point here is not that these answers are unsatisfying and that a more gifted thinker in applied ethics might have come up with something better. On the contrary, as a practical moralist Bok has done an admirable job. The historical perspective she brings to the problem of deception is impressive; her discussion of the theoretical background is acute; her treatment of particular problems is both clear and alert to complexity. The point is rather that applied ethics itself is either (at worst) a waste of time or (at best) a discouraging activity for any writer. Why? Because there really aren't any interest-

ing discursive answers to the questions of applied ethics. To some extent the questions of applied ethics can be answered. But in those cases where they can be answered, where there is some convergence of common moral sentiment, in those cases the answers will strike the reader as banal—as what he or she already knows. And in the majority of cases where no clear answers can be given, where what Aristotle called "practical wisdom" is required, the reader will be left frustrated and dissatisfied. Hence the unenviable position of Bok's reader—alternately bored or frustrated.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the book is its impersonal air. We all know about lying; we are all, even *Sissla Bok*, liars. Yet nowhere in a book that offers itself as a "personal exploration" do we find a single anecdote or example drawn from the author's experience. The examples—and there are hundreds of them—are drawn exclusively from literature, philosophy, and professional journals. Bok's voice is that of the moralist—unfailingly sensible and intelligent but also studiously impersonal, seeking to speak to us of what we hold in common. Yet it is precisely this moral perspective and its attendant generality which finally deadens the book. What does it feel like to lie? How does a human life change as it becomes more and more ensnared in lie? What is the mechanism of that entrapment and what are its consequences? These questions, apposite more to a phenomenology of lying than to its moral dissection, might in the end have provided a more powerful critique of lying. But that, of course, would have been a different and more lively book. □