



### **Prayers Before Studying Theology:**

From the cowardice that dare not face new truth  
From the laziness that is content with half truth  
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth  
Good Lord, deliver me.

--Prayer from Kenya

Almighty God, who sent the Spirit of truth to us to guide us into all truth:  
so rule our lives by your power that we may be truthful in thought and word and deed.  
May no fear or hope ever make us false in act or speech;  
cast out from us whatsoever loves or makes a lie,  
and bring us all into the perfect freedom of your truth,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Brooke Foss Westcott

### ARE THERE OCCASIONS WHEN LYING IS PERMISSIBLE OR EVEN GOOD AND NECESSARY?

In the fourth book of *De doctrina christiana* and his treatises *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium*, Augustine asks whether the eternal well-being of the human soul is a matter of such great importance that one might be justified in using deception to persuade people to adopt saving belief. This leads Augustine to consider some important related questions about the nature and moral evaluation of lying, including

- whether lying and deception are ever justifiable in the Christian life;
- whether lying is intrinsically evil (and therefore always to be avoided) and
- whether the moral wrongness that may attach to lying arises from the objective character of the act or from the intention of the agent.

*De mendacio* (394-395) and *Contra mendacium* (c. 420) argue that

- lying, no matter how small or great, is always a sin (there are no harmless "white lies" or justifications that can make it appropriate to lie, i.e. to avoid death or root out soul-killing heresy).
- open speaking of the truth to the other (in the way that God has commanded, with charity and a desire to win the other over to a love of the truth) is foundational to the Christian life.

*De mendacio* also argues (contrary to Jerome) it is not fitting for the Christian orator to make use of a tactical fiction or strategic lie, i.e. a fictional narrative of events which is sufficiently plausible (=inherently probable) that it can be used to create a pretext for preaching the Gospel, thereby adopting a utilitarian ethic (things are justifiable by reference to

what they achieve, honor, duty, mercy, or in this case the persuasion of one's listeners) just as pagan orators are inclined to do.

- Qualification: The finding of material for persuasive speech [*inventio*], including the production of fictional narratives for dramatic effect [*narratio*], is nonetheless not a lie [*mendacium*] but rather adds *color* to the speech.)

Augustine discusses the example of Paul in regard to Gal. 2:11-21, where Paul describes his clash with Peter at Antioch.

- Porphyry: This clash is evidence of a division among the apostles in regard to matters of truth.
- If this is false, what is to prevent other parts of Scripture but being false and intentionally deceitful rather than truthful, so that the credibility of the Scriptures is completely undermined?
  - Integrity and truthfulness must always and consistently be present in matters of religious doctrine (contrast blasphemy and perjury).
    - ♣ In religious doctrine there is a close relation between the character of the speaker and the content of the message.
    - ♣ Cf. Clement of Rome *First Epistle to the Corinthians*: "He who has forbidden us to use any deception can much less be a deceiver himself; untruth is the only thing that is impossible to God."
  - The lies cited with approval in the OT are to be treated as instances of figurative speech.
    - ♣ This approach is required whenever immoral acts are condoned or commended, according to *De doctrina Christiana* 3.10.14.
- Does not the inspiration of the sacred writers by God's Spirit ensure that they are able in writing to rise above the limits of human discourse to arrive at divine truth?

### **The Evils of Lying: Lying as Intrinsically Disordered**

Since according to Jn. 14:6 and parallel texts, God is Truth (the most basic reality toward which our minds were made to pursue and seek to obtain),

- (a) an indifference toward the truth;
- (b) an unwillingness to hear the truth;
- (c) a failure to be truthful
- (d) lying or deception

are all signs of a grave disorder in one's will due to the presence of sin.

Furthermore, disinterest in truth or refusal of the truth are the signs of an unteachable will, which is an even graver danger to the soul because it prevents one from recognizing and understanding the nature of the evils one is embracing and from grasping and appreciating the Gospel's message of salvation from evils by a source outside oneself.

- Such a person may continue to approach God in prayer with a list of his or her wants but is not keen on receiving God's evaluation of these wants and of one's various practical projects to get what one wants (unless God's judgment happens to coincide what they would like to pursue for their own reasons, largely independent of God and the divine will).

- Such a person is also content to be self-deceived and rationalize, as long as his or her faults are not exposed to public view.

It is also important to see that the question of truth is intrinsically related to the nature of God's own life and character.

- Just as in the divine life, the word that proceeds from the Father and manifests the Father is truthful and fully shares in the nature of the Father as Truth (the Son not having more or less truth but rather the fullness of truth, which characterizes the divine life).
- Furthermore, what the Son and Spirit produce in the human mind is an illumination or grasp of divine truth that under the influence of grace moves the soul toward better things.
- Truth is therefore correlated with God's presence and indwelling in the soul, a state that is incompatible with lies and falsehoods as contrary to truth.

This is also why we, being made in the image of God,

- have a natural aversion to error and,
- even when we deceive others, dislike being deceived ourselves and

therefore would deny that it would be good to accept the false as true or the true as false.

### **Lying Defined**

Lying involves "speech contrary to the mind."

In other words,

- the aim of speech and signs is for the truthful communication to others of one's inner thoughts, yet
- the liar speaks contrary to what he thinks in his heart, even though by the very act of speaking or giving testimony he claims to be relating what he is thinking in his heart and wishes the hearer to have faith in him and believe that this is so, so that either
  - the hearer believes to be false what the speaker knows to be true or
  - the hearer believes to be true what the speaker knows to be false.
- This definition allows Augustine to distinguish lying from simple error (the speaker being mistaken or deceived in his or her own beliefs but with no intention to mislead the hearer).
- This also makes lying relative to the speaker's intention in the communication of specific claims, rather than to the actual facts of the case (which the liar may or may not have rightly grasped) or the hearer's actual practical assessment of the lie (were they deceived by it) and response to it (do their subsequent actions accord or contrast with the claims made in the lie?).

Lying then is an intentional act, i.e. misleading another through desiring to say what is false.

- By this the liar breaks faith and commits injustice (becomes unjust), which is always useless and without profit, since it fails to conform to the order established by God's perfect justice, and is thus intrinsically harmful to the liar (quite apart from any harm that may or may not come to others).

- As a form of breaking faith, lying also undermines the trust that is necessary for social relationships to be maintained and a well-functioning community to exist.
  - Normally Augustine avoids basing his arguments upon consequences (e.g. avoiding harm to the other vs. benefiting the other within this particular situation--see Feehan, 1990, p. 74; 1991, p. 166), but here trust is a transcendental condition that is a prerequisite for friendship and other social relationships.
  - This is therefore consistent with Augustine's tendency to criticize lying from a non-consequentialist standpoint as an offence against truth and rationality, which are the transcendental conditions for the realization of basic human goods.

There are, however, different grades or degrees of lying, all sin and none of them defensible but reflecting different types of motives.

### **Establishing the Precise Relationship Between Lying and Intentionality**

How should intentionality be understood in cases where the intentionality of the liar is not primarily connected with the false speech, but rather with some further goal of persuasion that lies beyond and after the false speech?

Consider, for example, the following two situations:

- 1) One says what one knows to be false, knowing that one will not be believed and that this not being believed will affect the hearer's action (so that the hearer acts in a manner contrary to what is said).
  - Knowing the hearer's mistrust and that this mistrust will lead the hearer to act in a manner contrary to what is said, one utters a falsehood but apparently without the intention (expectation?) to deceive.
    - This involves the telling to another person something one knows to be false and presenting this as a truth to be believed even though one knows one will not be successful.
      - This likely meets Augustine's criteria for a lie, since it is speech contrary to what one believes to be the case but is presented to the hearer as a truth to be adopted. This is sufficient to meet Augustine's minimal definition of "intention to deceive" in terms of consent and a twofold (duplicitous) heart, even though one knows one's deception will be unsuccessful.
- 2) Telling the truth when he knows that this will not be believed and this disbelief will result in a corresponding action.

### **Augustine's Examination of Counterarguments**

(1) Lying, it is argued, is necessary in order

- to avoid serious harm to a third party or
- for spiritual benefits pertinent to salvation to be gained by a third party.

(2) Any evil that attaches to lying is offset by the good consequences achieved by the lie. These good consequences are sufficient positively to counterbalance the badness in the act itself.

(3) Even if lying is an evil, it is often less of an evil than what would occur if a lie were not told (and we would be in some sense liable or culpable for that greater subsequent evil if we should refuse to lie).

(4) This counsel never to lie is not applicable to all persons in all circumstances, either because

(a) it is a counsel for the perfect alone, who alone are able to live an angelic life while yet on earth and mired in everyday affairs or

(b) unconditional truth-telling is required only when one must give testimony in a judicial setting (this is the one place this must exist in order to preserve the trust necessary to maintain a correctly-functioning society).

Thus, it is argued, everyday life requires that we make use of certain evils (which are truly useful in limiting harm without causing additional harm).

- What matters is one's inner assent to the truth, which is not compromised by the necessary fudging required in everyday social transactions with others to keep the peace and get certain basic things done.
- We may therefore be required to do less than noble things to achieve some necessary benefit.
  - This last statement is what Augustine is concerned to ridicule in his examples which use sexual immorality as a means to secure some purportedly greater (spiritual) benefit for a third party, so that virtue is used to justify vice.
  - This is different from modern paternalist arguments for deception in religious matters, where the spiritual benefit is supposed to accrue directly to the person being deceived [and often deceived in regard to religious subject-matter], rather than the lie being told to someone to secure benefit/avoidance of harm for some third party [often without reference to religious subject-matter].
    - Consentius' arguments in *Contra mendacium* are more like the modern paternalist arguments in that a common interest and commitment with persons lacking right belief is feigned for the purpose of a concealed ulterior religious motive pertinent to the salvation of the person being deceived and typically involving the presentation of a religious message and the pressing of its claims upon the person in question. Augustine: this is contrary to truth, evangelical humility and charity (even where charity or good will is alleged as a reason for the deception); hence nothing truly good can follow from it, since it undermines things necessary to right belief and salvation.)

In responding to these arguments, Augustine holds that we are not morally responsible (culpable) for harms that come to others when we refuse to lie.

- This undercuts the argument that lesser evils are justifiable by reference to the prevention of a greater harm or the achievement of a greater good.

- Furthermore, non-sinful harms are transient (having to do with the things of this temporal life, i.e. the possession of external or bodily goods) and cannot command the same level of obligation, since they are not final harms.
  - If temporal benefits were made a factor, soon all would slip down the slippery slope and look to their more immediate bodily desires and pleasures (misusing the created goods they have received from God), instead of looking to the truth.

*There are three things that should compel us to work:  
Gpd's honor, our salvation, and the condemnation and  
abhorrence of every lie.*

--Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi, *The Dialogues*