
EVEN "WHITE" LIES

Germain Grisez

Lying & Other Deceptions in Communications Are Always Wrong

Lying and other deceptions in communication are intentional untruthfulness: They are attempts to express outwardly, and lead others to accept, something at odds with one's inner self. Such attempts divide the inner and outer selves of those who engage in them, and impede or attack the real community truthful communication would foster, even when deception seems necessary. Therefore, lying and other deceptions in communication are always wrong.

Not all lies are equally wrong. But even when there is no question of grave matter, truthfulness is more important than people usually realize. For untruthfulness often has cumulative consequences: habitual indifference to truth in the individual and erosion of trust in society. People begin by excusing lies to protect the innocent from malicious enemies and to safeguard inviolable secrets. But as experience plainly shows, they end immersed in disinformation and insincerity in every sort of public and private communication.

(A) Untruthfulness is at odds with a Christian's new life in Christ. In his deepening of the commandments, Jesus calls for such perfect truthfulness that oaths would be unnecessary: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Mt. 5:37). Other New Testament teaching both makes it clear that Jesus' new way of life excludes untruthfulness and ex-

plains why it does so:

Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. You did not so learn Christ! . . . Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another (Eph. 4:17-25).

Lying is part of the fallen human condition, but not part of humankind renewed in Christ (see Col. 3:9). As God is truth and his truth is in Jesus, so Christians are to live according to truth, putting aside everything which follows from ignorance of God's truth and from hardheartedness. Christian love requires truthfulness with one's neighbor, "for we are members of one another" — in other words, the very existence, or at least the quality, of communion in the new covenant now is at stake whenever one communicates with one's neighbors.

(B) Lying to enemies is incompatible with

Germain Grisez is Flynn Professor of Christian Ethics at Mount Saint Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The above article is part of material he is working on for his forthcoming Volume Two of *The Way of the Lord Jesus*.

love of them. Although the greater part of Catholic theology has considered the prohibition of lying a moral absolute, a lesser but significant part has held that lying sometimes can be justified, particularly when it is a question of lying to an enemy, who has no right to the truth, in order to protect the innocent from harm. The classic example is: May one not lie to a murderer who is seeking a potential victim?

It seems correct to hold that the Christian answer must be "no." Since one is to speak the truth with one's neighbor, one must not even lie to enemies, since enemies too are neighbors. Of course, one need not provide enemies with the truth of which one expects them to make bad use. However, even if one were certain that one were speaking with someone intent on committing murder, one would not act as love requires if one judged that person to be beyond repentance, and tried by lying to save the potential victim's life. Rather, to treat the enemy as a neighbor would be both to refuse to give the information demanded and to explain why: "I will not answer your question and help you do wrong; instead, for your soul's sake, I ask you to repent of your wicked intent." Such an answer might or might not succeed, but no other answer faithfully corresponds to the truth that the potential victim, the murderer, and oneself are called to.

Some recent authors have used the historically factual example of agents of a totalitarian power who asked those in charge of an institution to identify certain children who would then be sent off to a death camp. Was it not right to protect the children by lying? No, for to attempt to deal with the agents of a totalitarian power by lying to them is to maintain with them a semblance of community based on their false ideology. In other words, lying in such a situation is reluctant but real collaboration with illegitimate authority and tacit assent to it. By contrast, the appropriate Christian response would be to refuse to collaborate, to resist evil nonviolently, to appeal to God's authority and his justice, and to be prepared to die — preferably in place of those to be sent to the death camp, but if necessary with them — in witness to the falsity of that ideology and to the truth of the gospel which the ideology's proponents seek to replace.

(C) Mental reservation with the intent to deceive is a lie. Most Catholic theologians in modern times envisaged situations in which one could not adequately protect a secret by

remaining silent, rebuffing an inquiry, or distracting the inquirer. They held that lying is always wrong, but proposed that in such situations one might speak with a "mental reservation" — i.e., with a restriction of meaning intended to render one's statement ambiguous. The ambiguous statement, understood in one way, would express something in accord with what one had in mind, but not so clearly as to expose the secret; understood in the other way, it would deceive the inquirer and thereby also protect the secret.

It seems, however, that "mental reservation" itself has two meanings. In one sense it refers to ambiguous expressions, including many provided by established social conventions, which can be used effectively without any intent to deceive. The use of such expressions is not lying, and they usually should be used for courtesy's sake. In another sense, however, "mental reservation" refers to studied ambiguities which cannot be used effectively without an intent to deceive. With that intent, a mental reservation depends for its success entirely upon the false sense of the expression, whose true sense remains irrelevant to the communication. Thus, such a mental reservation is a lie.

(D) Lying to protect secrets should be unnecessary. Many examples proposed to show that a lie (or a mental reservation) is necessary to protect a secret do not actually show this, but instead show the difficulty involved in rebuffing enemies. For example, a priest called to testify in court about something which he knows is under the seal of confession can usually protect the secret by refusing to testify, but he may suffer legal penalties unjustly imposed by a government which does not respect the inviolability of the confessional.

In some cases, however, a simple refusal to answer a question will reveal the answer. For example, suppose that a priest has complied with the requests of some of those accused of a crime to testify on their behalf, since they did *not* confess it in the confessional. Then, his simple refusal to comply with some other defendant's similar request would reveal that individual's secret. However, such cases can and should be forestalled by consistently maintaining secrecy. If a priest always refuses as a matter of policy to talk about what he has heard or *not heard* in confession, his refusal to answer any particular question will not reveal any secret. But even if someone has failed to follow a sound policy about

secrets, he can avoid revealing a secret by saying: "Hitherto I answered questions of that sort, but now realize I should not have done so, and therefore have adopted a policy of refusing to answer any question of that kind. So, I refuse to answer, and you can draw no conclusions from my refusal."

(E) **Lying and other deception in communication can be grave matter.** The commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:16; see Dt. 5:20), explicitly prohibits a particularly noxious form of lying. However, not only perjurers but other liars can sin gravely (see I Tm. 1:10), and the psalmist's statement, "Thou destroyest those who speak lies" (Ps. 5:6), shows beyond doubt that this commandment condemns lies of every sort. Thus, if one deliberately deceives another about an important subject — e.g., a matter of faith or morals, or something on which an important decision will be based — one's lie or deceptive deed is a grave matter, even if one's ulterior purpose is not to harm anyone, but to bring about what one regards as some greater good. Such lying is not malicious in intent, but it is far more grave than the lying Catholic moralists used to class as "officious." For example, in today's world, more sophisticated and better informed people — not only proponents of totalitarian ideologies — often suppose that they may lie in public statements, media campaigns, and even scholarly publications ("simplify matters too complex for ordinary people to handle") in order to lead the public to accept and support ideals, policies, and programs those who think themselves more "enlightened" and/or "expert" judge to be good, right, and necessary. John XXIII, in *Ad Petri Cathedram*, condemns this sort of deception:

Anyone who consciously and wantonly attacks known truth, who arms himself with falsehood in his speech, his writings, or his conduct in order to attract and win over less learned men and to shape the inexperienced and impressionable minds of the young to his own way of thinking, takes advantage of the inexperience and innocence of others and engages in an altogether despicable business.

Moreover, since lying is sinful in itself, if one foresees that serious harm can result from one's lie or deceptive deed, that deception is a grave matter, even if one *only reluctantly ac-*

cepts the serious harm that one foresees as a side effect.

Further, the Golden Rule requires that the seriousness of harm to be expected from lies be evaluated from the perspective not of liars but of those deceived and others affected by lies. Liars often exaggerate the good lying will do and belittle its harmfulness to others, but liars who imagine that they tell only "white" lies often are quite offended when they discover that others have attempted to deceive them with very similar lies.

(F) **Supposedly helpful lies manipulate others and often harm them.** Sometimes people lie because they think doing so will help others and in no way harm anyone. For example, health-care workers sometimes lie to a patient when they think the truth would be psychologically harmful or the lie helpful to the patient's condition, and family members

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sometimes lie to one another in order to prevent sadness or anxiety which would be caused by a truthful account of bad or threatening news. Such lies are not grave matter, but are contrary to the goods communication serves. Helpful liars manipulate the one to whom they lie, presuming to judge what they cannot know: that the one they try to deceive cannot deal with reality, cannot make good use of the freedom which only truth can give, and will not suspect or even detect the deception (with a consequent loss of trust). Indeed, because of their impact on freedom and the consequence of suspicion, supposedly helpful lies often cause great, although unintentional, harm.

(G) Humorous lies manipulate others and often offend their dignity. Many moralists think that humorous (jocose) lies have little or no moral significance. This opinion may be based partly on a confusion between telling humorous fictional stories which are not intended to deceive anyone — and so are not lies, and can be morally acceptable — and humorous lies properly so called. The latter do aim to deceive someone, although usually only temporarily, and generally in the context of playful mocking or teasing (“kidding”). For instance, someone first tells another, who is credulous, something astonishing, embarrassing, or frightening, but untrue, and by this deception provokes an emotional reaction; then the joker manifests the truth and at least implicitly ridicules the reaction. Although the humorous lie usually is not a grave matter, its moral significance is obvious: Like every other lie, the humorous lie manipulates others. This fact also explains why humorous liars typically victimize people whom they regard as inferiors (and thus offend their dignity): Adults often tell such lies to children, male superiors to female subordinates, the sophisticated to the simple, and so on.

(H) Lying as a “lesser evil” is at best subjectively blameless. People often try to excuse or justify someone’s having lied in a difficult situation by arguing that it was the “lesser evil.” This could have any of three meanings. First, it could be a proportionalist argument that the norm prohibiting lying is subject to justifiable exceptions. But proportionalism is unacceptable as a theory of moral judgment. Second, it could be an argument that a venial sin of lying is excusable to avoid great harm. That is true if “excusable” means that the lying remains a sin but is easily forgiven, but it is false if it means that the moral evil of a

venially sinful lie is less than any nonmoral evil, however great. Third, it could be an argument that the choice to lie was excusable, inasmuch as the individual was perplexed in conscience — that is, he or she honestly thought that the only alternative to lying was to choose some greater moral evil, such as to violate a duty to keep a secret. This argument can be sound inasmuch as the choice made in perplexity was subjectively blameless. Still, it is never objectively true that the only alternative to lying is to choose some greater moral evil, and so the person who was perplexed in conscience either failed to think of the morally acceptable alternative or mistakenly judged it to be morally evil. ■
