Sissela Bok and the moral analysis of lying

A good man does not lie. It is this intuition which brings lying so naturally within the domain of things categorically wrong. Yet many lies do little if any harm, and some lies do real good. How are we to account for this stringent judgment on lying, particularly in face of the possible trivial, if not positively beneficial, consequences of lying?


I. What is wrong with lying?

Should we never lie? To say we should never lie seems untenable; but to open the door to lying flies in the face of an aversion captured by Charles Fried’s comment: a good person does not lie.

What is special about lying that makes us willing to look for all kinds of non-lying ways to accomplish what the lie accomplishes?

What the lie accomplishes is deception. Moralists have never claimed all deception is wrong, but some have claimed that all lying is wrong – and even if we don't agree with their claim, we can feel its force. We're not mystified that they make it.

What is a lie? A lie is a statement, believed by the liar to be false, made to another person with the intention that the person be deceived by the statement. This is the definition used by Sissela Bok and it has antecedents as far back as St. Augustine.

There are many ways, of course, to deceive without actually lying. Consider this scene: The Doctor enters your hospital room looking cheerful. “Have you seen the test results?” you ask. “No,” the doctor says, “they'll be available tomorrow. Relax and get a good night's rest.” In fact, the doctor isn't lying – the final results won't be available until tomorrow – but he is deceiving you by his manner. He already has preliminary indications of what the test results will show, and your prognosis is not good. Was he justified in assuming a deceiving manner?

What if we altered this scenario so that the doctor actually lied? Would that make his deception worse?

II. Sissela Bok's Analysis

Here is the case that Sissela Bok makes for the Principle of Veracity – a principle asserting a very strong moral presumption against lying. What, she asks you, would it be like to live in a world in which truth-telling was not the common practice? In such a world, you could never trust anything you were told or anything you read. You would have to find out everything for yourself, first-hand. You would have to invest enormous amounts of your time to find out the simplest matters. In fact, you probably couldn't even find out the simplest matters: in a world without trust, you could never acquire the education you need to find out anything for yourself, since such an education depends upon your taking the word of what you read in your lesson books. A moment's reflection of this sort, says Bok, makes it crystal clear that you benefit enormously by
living in a world in which a great deal of trust exists – a world in which the practice of truth-telling is widespread. All the important things you want to do in life are made possible by pervasive trust.

This thought-experiment shows you the social practice of truth-telling has great value both generally and personally. You benefit directly from the practice. But how does this fact of personal benefit translate into a personal moral allegiance to veracity? The fact that a system of truth-telling benefits you enormously doesn't by itself justify your adhering to the Principle of Veracity. After all, if personal benefit is all that counts for you, then why not reap all the benefits that a system of truth-telling brings, and then reap a little bit more by lying for personal gain?

Of course, you couldn't announce your policy to the public; it would have to remain your secret. You don't want to undermine the practice of telling the truth. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to gain anything from your lies. And you don't want people to distrust you. A lie is advantageous only in circumstances where people will believe it – only where a practice of truth-telling generally prevails. Such a practice prevails only when most people are doing their part to support it – that is, when most people are telling the truth. The liar, then, wants to be a free rider. She wants others to do their part to maintain a system, while she skips doing her part. She reaps the benefits of the system without investing the reciprocal sacrifice of supporting it.

Now, what gets you from the fact that a system of truth-telling benefits you personally to the further fact of subscribing to a moral principle against lying? The answer: a simple egalitarianism. You can't see any reason why you are special, why you are different from all the rest of mankind. Yet you have to view yourself as different if you think a different rule applies to you than applies to everybody else. In wanting there to be a system of truth-telling and in wanting also to lie whenever it benefits you, you want to make an exception for yourself. However, if you are unwilling to make an exception of yourself, unwilling to believe you are more special than everybody else, then Sissela Bok supplies you all the argument you need to see why you should adhere to the Principle of Veracity: telling the truth is just your doing your part to uphold the practice you benefit from.

So, there are two steps to defending the Principle of Veracity: step 1 depends the fact that you personally benefit from a system that you want others to do their part in maintaining; and step 2 invokes a principle of reciprocity or fair play, requiring you to do your part in maintaining the system if others are doing their part.

The Principle of Veracity is a moral, and not just a prudential, principle because it tells you not to lie even when you could get away with it.

III. Sissela Bok and justified lies

The Principle of Veracity states a strong presumption against lying. Lying is usually wrong but not always. The presumption can be overcome. When? When is lying morally justified, when not? How can you know? How should you go about deciding?

Sissela Bok offers a mechanical procedure for thinking about lies. Her Scheme of Applied Publicity has an introspective and an active part.
A. Introspective Part

If the prospect of lying tempts you, you begin by consulting your own conscience. In this inward survey you must ask the right questions:

- Are there truthful alternatives to your lie?
- What is the context of the lie (for example, what relationship exists between you and your potential dupe)?
- What goods and bads will be brought about by your lie?
- Taking account of context, relationships, etc., what are the arguments for and against your lying?
- What, apart from the considerations that bear on this particular case, are the effects of your lie on the general practice of veracity itself?

You must weigh the considerations pointed to by these questions in resolving how to act. Whatever your resolution, you need to ask and answer one more question: How would your resolution and the reasons for it impress other reasonable people? The importance of this last question suggests mere introspection is not enough.

B. Active Part

Even if you ask yourself all the right questions, you still may reason incorrectly, or be blinded to the importance of a particular factor, or fail properly to imagine how other people might respond. Thus you need to see how an actual audience responds to your reflections:

- Consult friends, associates, peers;
- Consult “persons of all allegiances”—i.e., people different from yourself in outlook, commitment, experience, etc.

Your aim: to arrive at a decision that would be acceptable to a reasonable public. The active part of Sissela Bok’s scheme is meant to train, and serve as a check on, the introspective part.

On those occasions when lying is justified, lying receives a defense a reasonable public would accept. In Bok’s Scheme, you try to run through the defense before you lie, querying a small sample of the public, a sample that is reasonably representative. Of course, this mechanical procedure can’t actually be carried out most of the time. Sometimes, if you can’t test out a lie ahead of time, you can take the opportunity to justify yourself after the fact. But even this is impracticable in many instances. Thus, you often have to fall back on your own imagination. You don’t lie unless you can imagine how other reasonable people, in different roles and circumstances, would endorse your lie if they knew about it. Justified lies meet an actual or hypothetical publicity test. Justified lies are different, then, than the run-of-the-mill free-riding lie. The free rider acts on a policy or reason that would not survive a publicity test, either prospective or retrospective, actual or hypothetical.

The reason we should utilize the quasi-mechanical method of public testing (at least until our powers of self-reflection become strengthened) is because of the inadequacy of two perspectives for thinking about lying. The first is the perspective of the liar. From this perspective, lies come too easily. The person planning to tell a lie easily convinces himself that his lie is for a good
cause. He sees all kinds of good reasons for lying. He should realize this perspective is unreliable, however, because there is another one in which he almost never finds of good reason for lying. That's when he takes up the perspective of the lied-to. Victims of lies seldom concede there was any justification for the lie told to them.

Neither of these perspectives is adequate by itself. We need to devise a perspective from which we don't too easily sell ourselves on lies but from which we can see the occasional justification for lying. "The agreement of a reasonable public" supplies such a perspective.

**Concluding illustration**

Incidentally, taking note of the two perspectives – that of the liar and of the lied-to – brings home a simple check that we are all familiar with in moral argument: role-reversal. You want to lie to someone? Well, what if you were the one being lied to? Would taking up that perspective change your view of the lie?

Take an example Sissela Bok discusses in her book, the example of the “headhunter” (a searcher for executive talent) who was proud of her method for getting reliable recommendations about job candidates. She floats lies about the candidates she’s investigating to see how a recommender responds. “I hear Smith doesn't get along well with her colleagues,” the headhunter offers. “I hear Jones sometimes takes credit for other people’s work.” By gauging recommenders’ reactions to these manufactured rumors, she elicits a richer report on a candidate’s character and experience, so she is convinced.

The headhunter is so proud of her method in part because she is obtuse. She never imagines herself on the receiving end of her method. She never imagines herself as somebody being lied about by a seeker of information regarding her. Were she vividly to imagine that scenario, she might come very quickly to appreciate the great potential for harm in what she was doing. She might reflect:

Suppose my boss is just about to make a choice to promote me rather than a colleague – a close call – when he gets a phone query from a headhunter dropping unflattering rumors about me. Even though my boss denies the rumors, perhaps hearing them leaves a residue of doubt in his mind, and he reverses his decision, promoting my colleague instead of me!

No one wants to be harmed by a lie. We’ve no reason to suppose otherwise about the headhunter. Thus, we’ve every reason to believe she would object to being on the receiving end of her method. Yet, her objecting may not be a decisive refutation of her method. There may be yet other impersonal reasons, apart from her personal desire to get good intelligence to offer her clients and her personally recoiling at being the object rather than the author of a lie, that bear on her practice and that must be considered in a full accounting of it. What would a reasonable public say about her policy, given all the reasons for and against it?