Is the “Whole Truth” Attainable?

Sissela Bok; Chapter 1 Lying
Contemporary Moral Problems
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Outline

• Chapter 1: Is the “Whole Truth” Attainable?
  • The “Whole Truth”
  • Truth and Truthfulness
  • Defining Intentional Deception and Lying
The “Whole Truth”

3 “If, like truth, the lie had but one face, we would be on better terms. For we would accept as certain the opposite of what the liar would say. But the reverse of truth has a hundred thousand faces and an infinite field.” Montaigne, Essays
The “Whole Truth”

• 4 There is a great variety of types of lies.

• “How can we ever attain the truth about any complex matter…?”

• “How can one… do full justice to the words used in court: ‘The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’?”

• “The ‘whole truth’ has seemed so obviously unattainable to some as to cause them to despair of human communication in general.”
The “Whole Truth”

• 4 How can a physician tell the “whole truth” to a patient when the whole truth is not known to any doctor about any disease in any patient?

• The actual size of the task of knowing the whole truth having “awareness that everything in life and experience connects… that nothing can be said without qualifications and elaborations…” is enormous.

• The daunting task of telling the whole truth saps the strength out of the most powerful individual.
The “Whole Truth”

- 4 “The whole truth is out of reach.”

- That fact has little to do with our intentions to lie, deceive or speak honestly.

- “These choices can be set forth, compared, evaluated. And when they are, even rudimentary distinctions can give guidance.”
The “Whole Truth”

- Sissela Bok suggests that avoidance of the topic is evidenced by the dearth of writing about deception and lying since the enlightenment.

- She tells us that “reluctance to come to grips with deception can stem from an exalted and all-absorbing preoccupation with truth.”

- Alethia a=un, letheia=forgetting. The truth was made real by telling it.

- “Only gradually did the opposition between truth and error come to be thought central to philosophy and the nature of verification itself spotlighted.”
Truth & Truthfulness

- The moral domain of truthfulness and lying,
- The much vaster domain of truth or falsity,
- “The moral question of whether you are lying or not is not settled by establishing the truth or falsity of what you say.”
- “In order to settle this question, we need to know whether you intend your statement to mislead.”
Truth & Truthfulness

• 7 “A false person is not one merely wrong or mistaken or incorrect; it is one who is intentionally deceitful or treacherous or disloyal.”

• 7, 8 “Compare… a ‘false note’ and a ‘false friend’; a ‘false economy’ and a ‘false witness.’

• 8 “Any number of appearances and words can mislead us; but only a fraction of them are intended to do so.”

• We must single out… from the countless ways in which we blunder misinformed through life, that which is done with the intention to mislead; and from the countless partial stabs at truth, those which are intended to be truthful.
Truth & Truthfulness

• 8 “It is to this question alone—the intentional manipulation of information—that the court addresses itself in its request for “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

• 9 Skepticism challenges the possibility of knowing the facts at all.

• So those who will settle for the complete and absolute truth as well as the skeptics who believe that no truth is available, the problem of truthfulness and falsehood are not a concern.

• The philosophers, however manage to tell the difference between truthfulness and falsity in their ordinary lives.
Truth & Truthfulness

• The philosophers, however manage to tell the difference between truthfulness and falsity in their ordinary lives.

• 10 “Ordinary decisions can no doubt be made in spite of theoretical beliefs which confuse truth and truth-telling or which set epistemological certainty ahead of ethical analysis.”

• “Many hesitate to grapple with the concrete ethical problems, intertwined as they are with psychological and political strands rendering choice so difficult.”
Truth & Truthfulness

11 Philosophical analysis has given short shrift to practical moral choices because of “muddles about the meaning of truth.”

But when it comes to actual problems that people have such as, “wondering, perhaps, whether to lie to protect a client’s confidences, of to keep shattering news from a sick man.”

“The absence of real analysis is reflected also in teaching and in codes of professional ethics.”

Liars justify their lies by saying that just because we can’t know the whole truth it doesn’t matter if we lie if we have a good reason to.
Truth & Truthfulness

• Read Block Quote page 12.

• The differences in perspective between liar and dupes are striking.

• We excuse in our own lying what we would not excuse in others.

• 13 “As dupes we know what as liars we tend to blur—that information can be more or less adequate; that even where no clear lines are drawn, rules and distinction may, in fact, be made; and that truthfulness can be required even where full truth is out of reach.”

• The fact that the “whole truth” is not attainable, does not mean that we can’t fruitfully discuss truth-telling and falsehood.
Intentional Deception

• 13 “When we undertake to deceive others intentionally, we communicate messages meant to mislead them, meant to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe.”

• “I shall define as a lie any intentionally deceptive message that is stated.”

• This is separated from all other forms of messaging, smoke signals and body language. Lying is a subset of deception. Deception takes into account every sort of intentionally misleading message. The category of deception is too broad for our purposes.
Intentional Deception

• 14 “Certain religious and moral traditions were rigorously opposed to all lying. Yet many adherents wanted to recognize at least a few circumstances when intentionally misleading statements could be allowed.”

• Speaking falsely to thieves and those who don’t deserve the truth.

• Speaking with a mental reservation.

• 14 “Such definitions serve the special purpose of allowing persons to subscribe to a strict tradition yet have the leeway in actual practice which they desire.”
Intentional Deception

• 14 When the rules were the strictest, loopholes were sought out most often.

• 15 Bok suggests that it doesn’t matter whether the definition of lying is strict or broad, as long as we retain the right to morally evaluate “the intentionally misleading statement.”

• Bok reiterates her “definition of a lie: an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement.”

• To add to the lie itself are the many ways information can be distorted and biased to suit any one individual or group.
Intentional Deception

• 16 “The many experiments on rumors show how information can be distorted, added to, partially lost. When passed from one person to another, until it is almost unrecognizable even though no one may have intended to deceive.”

• To avoid all these tangles, Bok will look only at clear-cut lies, where it is clear the speaker intended to mislead the hearer.

• “Therefore clear-cut lies will often be singled out and considered separately.

• What do such lies do to our perception and our choices? And when might they be justified?