mystery”: “life has somehow gotten hold of wisdom, of information, that taught it to take energy from its environment, to concentrate that energy, and with it to build and maintain the meaningful complexity of the biological cell” (58-59). Accordingly, he contends that “going inside the body and then inside the cell is a journey to wonderland” (60). But his whole book is a wonderland, because his contemporary science discloses that everything is a wonderland. Waking up in the morning is a wonderland. Our nervous systems, then our brains, and finally our minds only multiply the wonders.

No review can do justice to this work. It is no wonder, on the one hand, that this book converted England’s most famous atheist in his eighties to theism. On the other hand, any high-schooler can read it.

Dick Rolwing


As Walker Percy often observed, any satisfactory social science must account for man as a languaged being, man as homo symbolificus, to use Percy’s witty locution. Aristotle held that logos—a word translated as both speech and reason—is the distinctive human faculty, and the prologue of the Gospel of St. John famously describes Jesus as the Logos that became flesh. But what is the relationship between the divine Logos and that of man, made in His image and likeness? This question deserves serious attention, and Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity is an excellent place to start.

The Catechism denounces lying unambiguously: “By its very nature lying is to be condemned” (2485). Yet this simple and clear proscription conceals a surprisingly complex problem of moral inquiry that has its own rival traditions both without and within Christendom: What is a lie? It is through this inquiry that Paul J. Griffiths takes his readers in Lying, wherein he attempts with elegant prose and balanced argumentation to “seduce” (his word) his readers into adopting the Augustinian definition of lying, which is as follows: lying is any intentional, duplicitous speech, that is, any speech that is directly contrary to what one knows to be true. (Griffiths is ambiguous on the status of misleading, as opposed to contradictory, speech). As in Kant
(whom he treats in Chapter Thirteen), this definition is formal and categorical, holding true regardless of external circumstances. (He excludes silence, joking, and figurative speech from the definition, for reasons I find problematic). Unlike Kant, the Augustine/Griffiths categorical account is grounded in a theological ontology/analogy: Just as the Incarnation is the perfect and true articulation of the perfect and divine Word, so in man, made in God’s image and likeness, language should be the true verbal articulation of human intelligence. Any deliberate falsehood in human cognition or speech amounts to a “rupture of the divine image,” and “a vocalized word is true, on this view, when there is in what it says just and only what is in the concept to which it gives voice.”

Griffiths forthrightly acknowledges that “Augustine’s position on the lie is neither the only possible nor the obviously best position,” and he articulates and responds to alternative accounts offered by nine different thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, Jerome, Aquinas, Kant, and Newman.

A better definition of lying (one found in the Catechism at 2483, though compare with 2482), for example, might be the following: to speak duplicitously in order to lead into error someone who has the right to know the truth. The added circumstantial specification, “someone who has the right to know the truth,” places the definition of the lie within the context of justice, or what one owes to others. This specified definition is not equivalent to Consequentialist or Proportionalist moral reasoning, contrary to what Griffiths suggests. Whereas both of these species of moral reasoning involve determining the morality of an act by measuring prohibitions against foreseeable consequences, the specified definition is exceptionless and holds true in every particular circumstance which falls under its form. Telling an intentional falsehood to Nazis at your door, for example, is not an excusable lie weighed against consequences, it is no lie at all. In this it is similar to the definition of stealing, which is not simply taking some else’s property, but taking it against the “reasonable will of the owner,” or like murder, which is not simply killing a person, but killing “an innocent person.”

This definition of lying comports well with our common notions of justice. According to Augustine/Griffiths, “no temporal good, not even the saving of life or the protection from rape, can warrant the lie.” As one can see by this example, the stakes in the disagreement are high, and Augustine/Griffiths should be commended for their consistency in the face of them. And yet such consequences of a moral principle when they conflict with common notions of justice might
reasonably call into question the premises of that principle. Indeed Griffiths himself seems to acknowledge in his Conclusion that his position is virtually impossible to achieve in practice, a confession that may satisfy those prone to a certain dialectical idealism, but which gives little consolation to those whose work it is to “bring as little bad as possible” from the muddy affairs of an imperfect world.

More importantly, whereas Augustine/Griffiths measure speech according to its internal integrity (the accuracy with which the word represents the concept), they seem to downplay or neglect the fact that speech by its very nature is a communicative and “other-directed” act. As a vehicle of communication between persons, speech should be measured not simply by the accuracy of its representation but also by the intimacy and transparency of the communication it achieves. One danger of the Augustine/Griffiths definition is that persons will become preoccupied with achieving a mistaken notion of linguistic purity at the expense of charity.

The specified definition also seems to comport better with the theological reality of the Incarnation, in which Christ did not reveal the Father all at once in a simple expression, but slowly, deliberately, and cautiously, in a way analogous to the “divine pedagogy” of Sacred History itself. Though he withheld nothing in becoming Man, Jesus withheld much from men during his time on earth. And yet given the ontological necessities of the Augustine/Griffith’s formulation in which the accuracy of the representation has primacy, it is difficult to see how this “economy” of Christ’s incarnation, the “divine condescension,” could be justified.

Finally, the Church’s incorporation of this principle of condescension is enunciated in St. Paul’s first Letter to the Corinthians, “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some,” and is exemplified in his speech before the Areopagus in Athens, in which he utilizes pagan gods and poetry to present the message of the Gospel. As this tradition developed, many Church Fathers, including Clement, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Athanasius, articulated two terms to express the notion: The “disciplina arcani” (“discipline of the secret”) and “dispensatio” (“economy”). The first term referred to the responsibility to withhold the secrets of the faith from those who were not prepared to receive them. The second encouraged the faithful to always seek ways in which the faith could be most effectively presented. Thus St. Clement praised the man who “both thinks and speaks the truth, except when careful treatment is necessary, and then, as a physician for the good of his patients, he will lie, or rather utter a lie, as the Sophists say.”
In sum, Lying makes for a challenging, stimulating, even seductive read. Whether the seduction is a holy one the reader must decide.

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Notes


2. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2408.

3. Ibid., 2261.


5. It would be easy, but tedious, to quote the many passages of Scripture in which Christ charges certain persons—including demons—to silence, gives “secret” teachings and interpretations to his followers, and alludes mysteriously to his “time coming,” that is, to the consummation of his plan, a plan, I might add, which seems to remain obscure until Pentecost.


7. Acts 17:22-34. Dietrich von Hildebrand makes some important distinctions on the appropriate application of this principle in the eighth chapter of The Trojan Horse in the City of God: The Catholic Crisis Explained, forward by John Cardinal O’Connor (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1993; originally published 1967).
