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Book Review on Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life

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Dr. Martin W. Sivula

Bibliographical Data: (Author, Title, and Publication Data)

Author: Sissela Bok

Title: Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life

Publication Data: New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978

Background Information:

Who is the author? (What is the nationality and origin? When did the author write? Check standard reference books.)

Sissela Bok is a Swedish-born American philosopher who was born in 1934. She is the daughter of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, who are considered to have made landmark contributions in the twentieth century and are both Nobel Prize winners (Believer 2013). According to Robert K Fullinwider's article "Sissela Bok on lying and moral choice in private life – an amplification", her father, Gunnar Myrdal, is known for his 1944 study "An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. This study "set the stage for the post-World War II intellectual and political challenge to racial segregation in the American South" (Fullinwider 2007). In 1974 he earned the Nobel Prize for Economics for his scholarly work on poverty and development. Her mother, Alva Myrdal, received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1982 for some of her publication work as well as working on child-rearing issues in Sweden, working for the United Nations and UNESCO, and her role as Sweden's ambassador to India (Believer).

According to Fullinwider, Sissela Bok was educated in Switzerland and France, at the Sorbonne, and then studied at the George Washington University where she completed her BA in 1957 and a MA in clinical psychology in 1958. She then later received PhD in philosophy from Harvard University in 1970. One of her great contributions is said to have been her continued exploration of practical ethics or applied moral philosophy (Fullinwider 2007).

What other work has the author done?

Although the publication of "Lying: Moral Choice in Private and Public Life" is what pushed Bok into the limelight, some of her other books include "Secrets: On the

Ethics of Concealment and Revelation” (1982, 1989); “A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and Threat of War” (1989); “Alva Myrdal: A Daughter’s Memoir” (1991); “Common Values” (1996, reissued in 2002); and “Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment” (1998). Aside from her own books, she has co-authored “Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide” (1998) with Gerald Dworkin and R. G. Frey, and also co-edited “The Dilemmas of Euthanasia” (1975) with John Behnke, “Ethics Teaching in Higher Education” (1980) with Daniel Callahan (Harvard Center). Bok was formerly a Professor of Philosophy at Brandeis University, and is currently a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies (PBS 2004).

What is the author’s reputation?

Although she has been criticized on some of her work, Bok’s peers speak very highly of her. According to the article “Believer” one of her colleagues, Dennis Thompson (director of the Program in Ethics and the Professions and the Alfred North Whitehead Professor at Harvard University), said of her “She was one of the first to apply philosophy to issues of current concern. She is a pioneer in the field of practical ethics or applied moral philosophy, as it is sometimes called. She has a remarkable talent for identifying and clarifying issues that have important moral content when they need to come to public attention” (2003).

Bok is known to be very successful in her work. For many years, she was a member of the Pulitzer Prize Board and also serving for some years as its chair. Bok is on the editorial boards of the Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Criminal Justice Ethics, and Ethical Theory and Moral Practice and is also a fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. She holds honorary doctorates from different colleges and universities. Some of the awards for her work also consist of the Abram L. Sachar Silver Medallion, the Radcliffe Society Graduate Medal, the Barnard College Medal of Distinction, the Hastings Center Henry Knowles Beecher Award, the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Centennial Award and the St. Botolph Foundation Award for Distinction in Literature (PBS 2004)

Are there any important or enlightening circumstances connected with the composition of this work?

Bok makes a point in the book that within her life, she has dealt with the problems and difficulty of drawing the line between when to lie and when to tell the truth depending on the circumstances. She states, “This book is a personal exploration rather than an effort to dictate conclusions. It aims to narrow the gap between the worlds of the moral philosopher and those confronting urgent practical moral choices” (Bok 1978). She also goes into describing the moral experiences she has seen closely in her professional life, with nurses, doctors, lawyers, civil servants and many others. In this book, Bok hopes to show that we have all been poorly served by dominant practices of lies that are

thought to be justifiable, and therefore be able to answer the most important remaining questions which are: “What are the alternatives, for society and for each of us individually, to merely going along with such practices? And how can we act so as to changed them? What institutional and personal incentives may be needed? And what real risks might dissuade would-be liars” (Bok, introduction).

Subject Matter of the Book

What kind of book is it? (Is it fiction, history, popular psychology, textbook, technical?)

Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life is a fictional book. The author gives an approach to philosophic questions that are in regards to ethical dilemmas, therefore making this book very beneficial in our everyday life. In this book, Bok analyzes the theory on lying of many philosophers, such as Saint Augustine, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Aquinas. She also analyzes lying from the perspective of utilitarian philosophers. The utilitarian philosophers justify acts more according to the goodness or badness of their consequences.

What is the subject of the book?

The subject of the book is about lying and whether we should lie or speak honestly depending on the situation. Bok introduces her book by asking, “Should physicians lie to dying patients so as to delay the fear and anxiety which the truth might bring them? Should professors exaggerate the excellence of their students to give them a better chance in a tight market? Should parents conceal from children the fact that they were adopted?” (Bok, introduction). The book goes into more detail about why we lie, how we justify it and whether or not our justifications are to deem to be valid.

What material does it treat?

Through out the book, Bok focuses and puts more emphasis on the justification of lying. According to Bok, “to justify is to defend as just, right, or proper, by providing adequate reasons”. She continues to explain that the justification needs to hold up to some standard such as religious or legal or moral standards. Bok suggests that the justification must have an audience such as being directed towards God, or a court of law, or a person’s peers, or one’s own conscience. However, in ethical matters an audience is considered to be a “reasonable person” in general. (Bok Pg.91). Throughout some of the

chapters, she discusses justification more in depth with great detail and clarification. She gives many examples of lies that are justified.

What is the tenor of the book—the author’s basic interpretation of the material?

Bok bases her book on whether one should lie or speak honestly, and what one should say as well as what they should hold back. She asks the question of how can one do full justice to the words used in courts: “The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”? Bok continues to explain that the “Whole truth” has seemed to be so obviously unattainable in today’s society. Some people see so many barriers that prevent us from obtaining truthful knowledge as well as communicating it (Bok Pg. 4). In the first few chapters of the book, Bok analyzes the nature of lying and the approaches to evaluating lies. Although she does agree on the fact that there are circumstances where lies are warranted, she also displays her worry. Bok values the concern that lying may cause harm in trusting and as a result this can hurt someone when they lie on an individual.

Method of Organization

Summarize in your own words the table of contents

The table of contents begins with an introduction where Bok summarizes the concept of lying. She starts off by introducing questions that really challenge one’s mind on whether a lie could be considered warranted. Each chapter goes into more details on the concept of lying and its justifications. Below is a short description or idea for each chapter. The chapters are as follows:

Chapter I – Is the “Whole Truth” Attainable

This chapter introduces the differences between the different domains of truthfulness versus deception and truth and falsity. It also describes and talks about deception and by communicating messages that are meant to mislead.

Chapter II – Truthfulness, Deceit, and Trust

This chapter discusses the choices people have when lying. It is believed that lying requires a reason while telling the truth does not. The chapter also gives a perspective from the person who has been lied to and the person who is considered to be the liar.

Chapter III – Never to Lie?

This chapter questions whether one should ever lie. Bok analyzes the different views of philosophers, Augustine and Kant. It then goes into the religious views of what they believe God would accept.

Chapter IV – Weighing the Consequence

This chapter goes into details about Theologians and Zealots and how they believe that not even one harmless lie should be told in order to save the lives of a human race. It also goes into the views that Utilitarians have on the subject of lying.

Chapter V – White Lies

This chapter discusses white lies, which is known to be the most common lies. They are considered to be harmless. The chapter focuses on different situations such as providing placebos and writing a letters of recommendation and whether they are considered to fall into the harmless lies category.

Chapter VI – Excuses

This chapter describes the three different ways that excuses can seek to extenuate. It also goes into the justification of lies that are used to avoid harm, and lies that are seen as producing a benefit and help others.

Chapter VII – Justification

This chapter describes what is considered to be a justified lie along with the different levels of justification.

Chapter VIII – Lies in a crisis

This chapter discusses circumstances where there is a crisis and one may need to lie.

Chapter IX – Lying to Liars

This chapter tries to discuss the debates that have arisen behind the question of “whether or not to use deception to infiltrate the sects they wish to subdue or convert; among their victims, whether or not to conceal their beliefs.” It also goes in to the well-known expression “an eye for an eye”, which states a lie to a liar is what he deserves.

Chapter X – Lying to Enemies

This chapter discusses the main purposes of lying to an enemy, which also has the same purposes as lying for survival. Bok provides some alternatives to lying to enemies as “Rule of the Game”.

Chapter XI – Lies Protecting Peers and Clients

This chapter discusses the obligations to protect peers and clients not with lying or deception, but rather with silence and withholding the truth. Bok also discusses the three reasons to keep secrets confidential.

Chapter XII – Lies for the Public Good

This chapter discusses the “noble lie” which is used by Plato to express a most important fact about lies by those in power. Bok discusses that although leaders have great power, they should be leading without deceiving.

Chapter XIII – Deceptive Social Science Research

This chapter discusses social science experimentation and what the different harms may be. This chapter also includes views from philosopher Francis Bacon.

Chapter XIV – Paternalistic Lies

This chapter describes paternalistic lying and whether or not it can be justifiable.

Chapter XV – Lies to Sick and Dying

This chapter basically describes deception as therapy. It goes into how lying to patients is considered to be justifiable if it serves to protect the patient.

Chapter XVI – Conclusion

The conclusion summarizes the book by discussing the different forms of deception and intended lies. Still we live our lives amidst all forms of duplicity. Bok concludes by emphasizing the importance of trust and integrity and how they are precious resources.

The Appendix provides excerpts from works by Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Frances Bacon, Hugo Grotius, Immanuel Kant, H. Sidgwick, R. F. Harrod, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and G. J. Warnock.

What are the tone and style of the book? (What kind of audience is being addressed? Does the author give interesting facts or analyses?)

The tone of the book is very factual as well as opinionated. Bok is very professional in giving her views and opinions. As stated above, Bok analyzes the different perspectives of different philosophers. Although I found the book to be a little boring, it was still very interesting to read the different views and beliefs of the different philosophers. Bok points out that despite numerous religious and moral statements against lying, people will still lie in certain situations. Bok indicates that she hopes that the study of the problems of telling the truth will shed some light also on the relation between coercion and deception, whether in a family, an institution, or a society (Bok, introduction). I feel that this book would be great for anyone who wants knowledge on lying as it relates to ethics, especially doctors and lawyers.

State four to ten main ideas of the book. Be as descriptive as possible.

It is very important to understand the difference between the “moral” domain of intended truthfulness and deception, and the domain of truth and falsity. In other words, the moral question of whether you are lying or not is not established on the truth or falsity of what you say, but instead on whether you intend your statement to mislead. Truth and falsity are two domains that often overlap and each may be indispensable to the other. It is also important to understand and see the differences between truth versus truthfulness and falsity versus falsehood. Although they may seem identical, they are not. (Bok 6)

White lies, also known as “harmless lies” are the most common. It is usually considered absurd or unnecessary to even condemn them when they are compared to bigger and more threatening lies. Bok suggests that a white lie is more a falsehood not meant to injure anyone, and has little role on morality. In the eyes of many, some white lies cause no harm and are needed for support. Some white lies are told more to cheer someone up or in effort to flatter. The book uses the example “How nice to see you” (Bok Pg. 58). Even if that’s not exactly the case, we often use that “white lie” approach so that we don’t hurt the person’s feelings.

One of the hardest questions to answer is whether or not we should ever lie. Although the simplest answer, in principle, to lying is just to rule out lying, there is more

to it. In reviewing this question, Bok analyzes the theories of philosopher Saint Augustine and Immanuel Kant. Augustine claimed that God forbids all lies and that liars endanger their mortal souls. According to the book, Augustine defined lying as having one thing in one's heart and uttering another with the intention to deceive (Bok Pg. 37). Kant on the other hand rejected Augustine's concept in defining certain falsehoods as not being lies. Kant defined a lie as "merely an intentional untruthful declaration to another person" (Bok Pg. 38).

It is important to understand excuses and how it can conflict with the requirements for truthfulness so as to at times make lies permissible. According to Bok, "an excuse seeks to extenuate, sometimes to remove the blame entirely from something which would otherwise be a fault." There are three ways that excuses can seek to extenuate. In the first way, excuses may claim that a supposed lie is not really a lie but rather a joke or an exaggeration. In the second way, excuses may claim that although there may have been deception, the person is not really or not completely responsible. The liar may claim that his lie was not meant to be misleading, or was incompetent, perhaps drunk. In the third way, excuses offers moral reasons for a lie. Also, it aims to try to show that a lie should be allowed under certain circumstances (Bok Pg. 74).

Select and quote one short passage as an example of the author's insight. Why did you select this quote?

"It is not inconceivable that unhappy news abruptly conveyed, or a great shock given to someone unable to tolerate it, could also bring on such a "dying response," quite unintended by the speaker."

The book indicates that challenges are growing to the three major arguments for lying to patients: that truthfulness is impossible: that patients do not want bad news; and that truthful information harms them. Doctors argue that informing a patient of an illness is useless as they will resist and deny having been told what they cannot assimilate (Bok Pg. 227)

I selected this quote based on my personal life experiences within my family. Back in July, my 86 year old grandfather was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach. As a family we decided that we would rather him not be told as we felt him knowing wouldn't do anything for him or change anything. We felt that at the age that he is and with the way he is fragile that the shocking news could cause him to be depressed and pass on from the shock news. I personally feel that this type of lie is justifiable. Although some may disagree and feel that a lie is a lie, others may feel differently when it becomes personal or involves a loved one.

Lastly, give your overall synopsis of the book and your final recommendations.

We've all been in a situation where we have had the need to tell a lie. The book, "Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life" gives the reader a better view of whether or not it is appropriate to lie. I feel that this book is clearly written and Bok's main points are very well developed. Although she often repeats her self and there appears to be contradicting views and beliefs, she puts a greater deal on the fact that people should not lie. Although I did find the book to be a little boring, I felt this was a great choice for the ethics class as it questions the morality and the way the different theories of ethics approach lying in different ways. Reading this book led me to think about my own actions. I consider myself to be an honest ethical person, however some may question my actions and my views on lying to protect a loved one. In essence, I was very impressed with the way the book was presented and would highly recommend it.

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