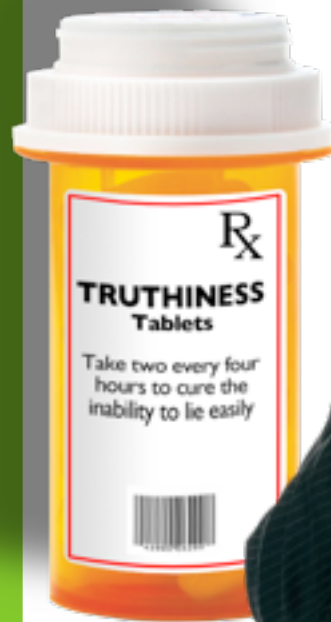


# Lying

& DECEPTION



TRUTHINESS DEFINED

## There are three, basic constructions concerning lying

1. "Do not lie" has the special status of a moral law, which means that it is always wrong to lie, no matter what the circumstances.

- In Kant's words, it is a "perfect duty," never to be excused or overridden.
- On this construction, the very nature of lying entails harm, because it undermines our confidence in the truthfulness of speech itself.
- In other words, "What if everyone did that?"

- Of course, the question arises as to whether it is ever permissible to lie.

2. Utilitarians insist that lying is wrong because a lie does, in fact cause more harm than good. However, there is no absolute prohibition.

- Cases of lying that cause no harm (white lies) are not necessarily wrong.
- Can we then assume that lying that causes no apparent harm is okay?

3. Character: One's virtues are what counts, so honesty becomes a good character trait to have. A person of good character, then, simply does not lie.

- Once honesty becomes ingrained in one's character, it becomes second nature to tell the truth, thus not a constant battle between conscience and temptation.
- Is a person who never lies even a possibility?
- If not, can anyone have a good character?

Duty, Utility, and Virtue  
all favor truth telling



# None of these really come to grips with lying and why we shouldn't engage in it—nor do they explain the possible exceptions adequately.

## What about social relations, or individuals?

- Lying is a social activity. It involves other people.
- Lying is wrong because it constitutes a breach of trust, which is not a principle but a very particular and personal relationship between people.
- What ultimately makes lies most objectionable is that they occur in a context in which one expects the truth, most obviously, in response to a direct inquiry.

## Attempts to Define Lying

### “UTTERING SOMETHING THAT IS FALSE.”

- The problem of sincerely spoken ‘lies’:
- If you have yourself been misinformed and said something false, you have still told a lie.
- We believe many false things, so it's practically impossible not to lie in this sense.

### SAYING SOMETHING THE SPEAKER KNOWS TO BE FALSE

- The Problem of Unasserted ‘Lies’

## All these definitions still seem defective.

- Actors on TV or the stages do them routinely, but it appears that their sayings do not count as lying.
- You do not take me to be lying when I say “Good morning” when the weather is terrible.

*Lying requires asserting a claim to be true with the intention to lead the listeners to believe that claim.*

- Actors do not assert what they say to be true; they merely pretend to assert it to be true.
- When I say “Good morning”, I am not asserting it with the intention to lead you to believe that it is a good morning.

## So, what exactly is lying?

*Asserting something you know to be false, with the intention to lead someone to believe you.*

## Lying and Truth-telling

- Don't confuse the obligation not to lie with the obligation to tell the truth.
- There is no general requirement to tell the truth, for in most situations you are not required to tell anything at all: you may remain silent if you like.
- In fact, we sometimes have the duty not to tell certain truths: the duty of confidentiality about national security info, about privacy info, of doctors' about patients' conditions, or of lawyers or accountants' about client's conditions, of the judges and juries' about the cases, of employees' about their companies' certain trade secrets etc.
- This does not deny that we may be required to report certain truths, such as someone's wrong deeds, info about your income to the IRS.

## Do We Have the Duty Not to Deceive?

- Some people argue that the obligation not to lie is derived from a more general obligation of not deceiving someone.
- A person deceives someone when the person makes an intentional attempt to lead him or her to have a belief, which the person believes to be false. One can deceive someone with or without asserting something. (This is the difference from lying as we define.)

- For example: Some advertisements are deceptive in that they give deliberately selected data or picture their products under a favorable light, which will mislead most ordinary people to draw false conclusions about those products.
- The advertisers are deceiving, but they are not lying because they do not assert the false conclusions.

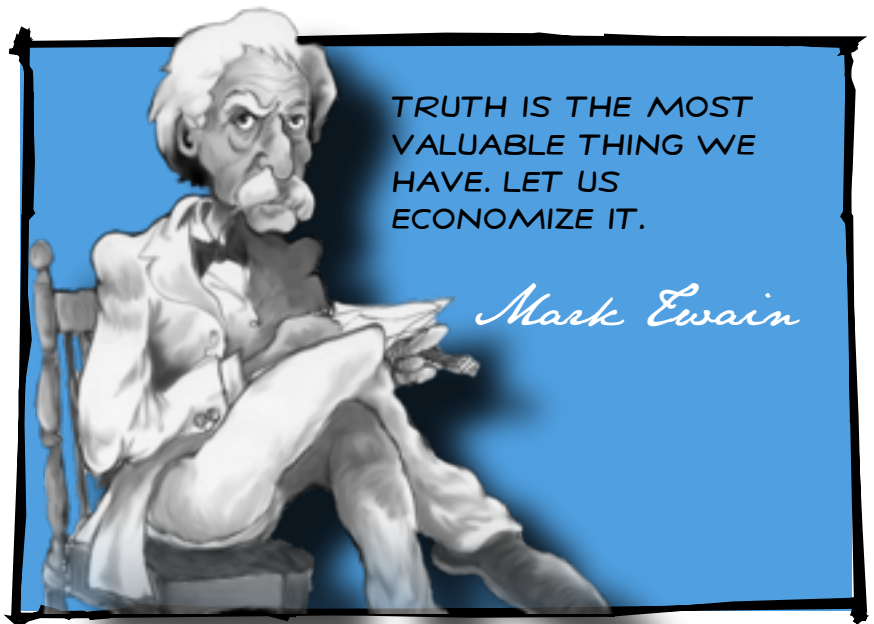


## Lying vs Deception

- Remember that the intention to mislead is associated with both lying and deception, and they often have similar consequences.
- Remember also that deception and lying usually have similar consequences. i.e., The receiver will get false information and act accordingly.

## Is It Always Wrong to Tell a Lie?

- Lying for your own or someone else's safety
- Lying as the only means for keeping confidentiality or a promise
- Lying to your enemies
- Lying to children (in order not to harm them—paternalism)
- Lying when the audience doesn't expect honesty (actors)
- Lying about matters that are "none of your business" (privacy)
- "White lies" (i.e., lying to someone in order to throw a surprise party for her.)



## Sissela Bok's "Scheme of Applied Publicity"

Not all lies are condemned; however, they must be proven to be a necessary last resort.

**SISSELA BOK** DEFINES LYING AS "COERCION."

- Telling someone a lie forces them to act in a way different from how they would have acted had you told them the truth.
- Thus, you are coercing them to act in this way.

Bok's "Scheme of Applied Publicity," has an Introspective and an Active part.

### INTROSPECTIVE

- 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.

### ACTIVE

- Consult others regarding your decision.
- "Others" here indicates people of all allegiances—both like and unlike you in nature.
- Role Reversal—How would you feel if you were the one being lied to?
- No one wants to be harmed by a lie.



*Sissela Bok*