

TRUTH -- OR CONSEQUENCES

Review of *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* by Paul J. Griffiths

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Everyone has lied. Most people are uneasy about lying, but most also justify at least some of their lies. How uneasy should we be? Is there such a thing as an innocent lie? What is a lie, anyway? And what is at stake in these questions -- what, exactly, is endangered if we get the answers wrong?

No one takes a harder line than St. Augustine, for whom all lies are wrong by their nature. This is also the view of the Catholic Church, although it has not been the view of all Christians through the centuries, or for that matter of all Catholics. So when Paul Griffiths, Schmitt Chair of Catholic Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, advertises an Augustinian theology of the matter, one knows he will be defending embattled ground.

In fact his project in *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* is more difficult still, for the view of lying that Griffiths proposes is *even stricter* than that of the Church -- though not, in his view, stricter than that of Augustine. To bring it to a point, he takes a sterner view of what it is to lie. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (sec. 2482) takes its definition from Augustine's *De mendacio* (On Lying): "A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving." What the text probably means by falsehood is what St. Thomas Aquinas called "formal" falsehood and Griffiths calls "duplicity" -- deliberately speaking what one thinks to be untrue, whether or not it is, in fact, untrue. So understood, the definition includes two conditions regarding intentions. To tell a lie, (1) I must intend a mismatch between my thought and my word, and (2) I must also intend to deceive by it. This is where Griffiths becomes stern. In his view, the deliberate mismatch of word to thought is always a lie, whether or not I intend to deceive anyone.

Why does Griffiths call his view "Augustinian?" In the definition quoted in the Catechism, Augustine plainly affirms both conditions. Griffiths' answer is that Augustine is inconsistent; sometimes he writes as though all duplicity is lying, at others as though I haven't lied unless I also intend to deceive. His most mature and consistent view, says Griffiths, is that duplicity is all that matters. I am not sure how much rides on this claim, because Griffiths makes duplicity do some of the work that in other accounts is done by deceptive intention. Suppose I tell a joke about a duck going into a bar and asking the bartender for a drink. There is no such duck; have I then lied? I would say no, because I am not trying to make anyone think that there is. Griffiths would say no, because given the

conventions of joking, I do not understand myself as saying what I think to be false. This makes the implications of Griffiths' position for casuistry -- "Would *this* be a lie, and would *that* make it wrong?" -- less than clear. Nevertheless, considering how much weight Griffiths places on the definition, it is surprising that the opening definitional chapter is perhaps the weakest in the book. Griffiths offers nothing like the kind of textual analysis that would be necessary to show that Augustine really means what Griffiths says he means.

This ought to be fatal to the book. Curiously, it isn't. What really drives Griffiths' argument is not what Augustine says about the definition of lying, but what Augustine says about the relationship of man to God. Griffiths tries to show, not that only one definition of lying fits Augustine's statements about its definition, but that only one definition of lying fits his theology.

According to Augustine, says Griffiths, words are signs -- not natural signs, as smoke is a sign of fire, but conventional signs, as the word "cat" brings a cat to mind for speakers of English but not speakers of French. Now a cat is something outside me, but words can also signify what is in the mind -- for example what I believe about the cat, or what I regret about him. To make the private, internal contents of the mind external and public is the defining characteristic of speech. Part of the reason why duplicity is perverse is that it perverts this relationship. But there is more, says Griffiths.

Although speech signifies thought, it is not the same as thought. The thought, or inner "word," is nonphysical because it is not a vocalization, preverbal because it cannot be identified with any particular set of conventional words, and nontemporal in the limited sense that whatever is true or false in my thought is eternally so. But when I speak, I choose words and vocalize them in time. These differences make every phase of speech unreliable. Perhaps we would not need language for communication, had it not been for the Fall. As Griffiths concludes, "anything that could deepen this unreliability (as the lie would) should be shunned." But there is still more.

Speech occurs in three phases: "From what you think to what you say to what your hearer understands you to think." This triadic progression in speech engages the triadic unity among memory, intelligence, and will. Memory is where the internal "word" is stored as a disposition to have certain ideas or concepts; intelligence is the activation of those ideas or concepts as thought; and vocalization is the utterance of this thought by an act of the will. But for Augustine, the relation among memory, intelligence, and will is not merely triadic -- it images the divine Trinity:

We might say (though Augustine does not) that the memory-intelligence-will triad, when gazed at with the appropriate intensity and lack of distraction, serves (or may serve) as an icon of the being of God. An icon participates in what it represents, and because it does so it can displace the gaze from itself to that in which it participates (p80.)

The most fitting way to understand speech, then, is that "it makes thought audible by invocation as the divine word was made visible by incarnation." By improperly and sinfully dividing speech from thought, the lie "ruptures God's image in us." By so doing, it also displaces our gaze from God, in whose being all speech ought to participate, and turns it back to ourselves in a futile attempt at control and possession; for truthful speech, says Griffiths, is most truly regarded as incipient adoration.

The first part of Griffiths' book develops this line of thought, with the heavy lifting done mostly by chapters four and five. At its highest points, the argument is absorbing, suggestive, and lyrical -- far more so than my summary can convey. In the second part of the book he offers "Augustinian readings" of what nine other thinkers, both Christian and non-Christian, have written about the lie: Plato, Aristotle, Chrysostom, Jerome, Cassian, Aquinas, Kant, Newman, and Nietzsche. The author's explanation of the reason for these readings is rather odd, but very postmodern. As he explains in the introduction, the rightness of what Augustine thinks about the lie "depends on the rightness of what he thinks about a good many other things." But "disagreements about such matters are, I should think it obvious, not typically capable of resolution by argument." For this reason, he barely troubles with argument in defense of the position he has pledged himself to defend. "Commentary is likely to do a better job," he says, because "it is possible to use commentary to clarify and illuminate the contours of a particular position by bringing it into close contact with a competing position," and one way to do this is "to read a text presenting a competing view through the spectacles of the Augustinian view" (p17).

There is so much to half-agree with in all of this. Granted that fundamental disagreements are rarely capable of resolution solely by argument, does it follow that argument has no role at all to play in their resolution?

There are other problems with the book. In the first place, although Griffiths works hard to connect the Augustinian view of the Trinity with the Augustinian view of speech, he puts much less effort into showing that Augustine makes this connection. I am not sure that he sees the necessity of doing so. In the second place, although Griffiths' argument succeeds in showing how important it is not to lie, it does not quite justify his view of what lying involves. Remember that according to Griffiths, the only thing necessary for a statement to be a lie is deliberately false signification. Whether you also intend to deceive is completely beside the point; it is irrelevant not only to the definitional question of whether you have lied, but to the further moral question of how bad a lie you have told. "If the lie-as-such is sinful," Griffiths explains, "the sense in which and the extent to which it is sinful will remain the same for all lies" (p180). This does not seem to follow from his premises. As he points out, what the will "typically" intends in the third phase of progression from thought into speech is to "replicate in others the thought present in the speaker's mind" (p78). It would seem then that the intention to do so completes or perfects the act of speaking truthfully. If this is so, then even if the intention to deceive is not part of what makes a lie a lie, surely it makes a lie even more contrary to the truth.

This is, in fact, the opinion of Thomas Aquinas -- and in Aquinas' own view, at least, he and Augustine are wholly in agreement. In the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa Theologica* (question 110, article 1), Aquinas explains that there are three ways in which a statement may be opposed to truth. First, it may be materially false; second, it may reflect an intention to say what is false; third, it may reflect an intention to make the other party believe what is false. As to the first, whether a statement is materially false is merely incidental to its being a lie; after all, a liar may say what is true, thinking it false. As to the second, the fact that a statement reflects an intention to say what is false is what *makes* it a lie; here Griffiths and Aquinas agree. As to the third, the fact that a statement reflects an additional intention to deceive has nothing to do with its being a lie, but plenty to do with what kind of lie it is. It is an even falser lie -- false in one additional way -- as he paradoxically puts it, a "perfect" lie. This is not to say that it is the *worst* kind of lie. All sins are to be avoided, and all lies are sins because they violate that due order for which the mind was made and through which it participates in the mind of God. Not all lies take on the additional evil of opposing charity, which would make it a mortal sin.

To my way of thinking, the Thomist and Augustinian views of lying are complementary. The case for the defense: Although Aquinas does not emphasize the triune character of God's image in us as Augustine does, his thought is open to that emphasis, and it brings sorely needed order to the relation between deliberately false signification and the intention to deceive. It also brings the virtue of truthfulness into relation with the virtue of justice -- with what we owe others as fellow bearers of God's image -- and so rounds out Augustine's discussion of what we owe God directly. For Griffiths, though, this sort of thing is traitor talk, and his splenetic treatment of Aquinas (who is, by his own admission, the closest of all of the nine to Augustine) unfortunately typifies his approach to those who disagree with him. In Griffiths' ledger, Aquinas doesn't just fail to think of speech in terms of the triune image, he *refuses* to do so (p183), and through this refusal he "shows himself insufficiently serious as a Christian thinker" (p183). Aquinas' attempt to relate truthfulness to justice corrupts his whole analysis because it is the wrong "starting point" (pp174, 184), says Griffiths, and his distinctions among lies according to the ways in which they oppose truth and love show that he cannot remember his own definition (p177). These flaws mark those who follow him, so that Thomists are "much more likely" than Augustinians to rationalize lies (p183). This happens because and to the extent that "a fully Christian mode of thought about speech has been abandoned" (p184). There is a lot more such venting, and by the end of the book, the author has convinced himself that Aquinas thinks some lies ought to be told (p230). Of course one should appreciate polemic when it is deserved and well done. But that requires good aim.

In his conclusion, Griffiths revisits another favorite theme of Augustine's, though here he looks a bit like Stanley Hauerwas. No one has the power by himself to abandon the lie. On the other hand, we can "apprentice ourselves" to the Church -- to the community of truth, whose principal speech act is adoration, and through whom God pours out sanctifying grace. The theme, then, is the relation between the City of God, founded on this aspiration, and the City of Man, founded on its denial. Griffiths' terse comments about the former are

interesting. About the latter, the less said, the better. Granted, for example, that lying is pervasive in every political regime, including democracy, where lying typically takes the form of pandering to voters in order to attain elective office. Does it really follow with so little argument that the Christian may never seek elective office, or that he may never prefer democracy to forms of government in which lying is even more pervasive? **[I should like to add "such as our own," because more and more the shots are called for us not by elected officials, but by judges and administrative bureaucrats.]** But the book should not be taxed too heavily for the tendentiousness of its nominal conclusion; its real conclusion, which is far more interesting, lies in part one.

Lying is a work of large flaws, but also real merits, which deepens our preexisting understanding of how gravely disordered the act of lying really is. Though its own estimate of itself should be rejected, the worth of its accomplishment is not otherwise impaired by the fact that it claims to do much more than it does.