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On Lying

By Dallas G. Denery II, Jake Ransohoff, Susan L. Einbinder, Nancy Mandeville Caciola, Jamie Taylor, and Gyula Klima

1. INTRODUCTION

By Dallas G. Denery II

“Every man is a liar.”

It could hardly be any clearer, not just a few of us, not just many of us, but all of us—we are all liars. We read this not just once in scripture, but twice. It first appears in Psalm 115.11, as the Psalmist cries out, “I said in my excess: Every man is a liar.” It appears a second time in Paul’s Letter to the Romans 3.4, slightly, not to mention, influentially, modified, “But God is true and every man is a liar.”¹ No doubt medieval writers could parse the differences between God and humanity in any number of ways, but Paul’s contrast between God as true and humanity as deceitful proved a popular one.

There was good reason for this.

As Nancy Caciola notes in her contribution to this cluster, for medieval Christians the first recorded conversation was little more than a convoluted knot of visual and verbal deceptions. The devil, disguised as a serpent, lies to Eve, who, befuddled or not at the creature’s failure to recite correctly God’s commands concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, lies in response to its query. The rest, as they say, is history—literally. Human history as we know it begins with the first lie. As the primal story unfolds, we learn that lies can only beget more lies, and not only lies, but all manner of woe—cowardice, shame, uncontrollable urges, disease, death, toil, and labor pain. God may have created the world and everything in it, but the lie made us who we are and gave the world its definitive texture and color. Every one of us is a liar because we are all children of the lie, living in a world the lie transformed into the strange and desolate land in which we eke out our diminishing days.

So what do we do? How do we respond to our exile and imprisonment in this fallen world? Should we fight fire with fire and lie to the liars? Should we lie to protect ourselves from the dangerous temptations that everywhere surround us? Or should we strive to remain forever aloof from this world with its deceptive pleasures and false promises, fearful that even the slightest accommodation to its ways will all but ensure our eventual and eternal damnation?

Augustine had decided answers to these questions. In *On the Trinity*, he argued that every lie is a sin because every sin takes the form of a lie. Whenever we lie, whenever we sin, we reject the truth that is God, distancing ourselves from him as we sig-

¹ All biblical references are from the Stuttgart Vulgate, *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber, Boniface Fischer, et al., 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart, 1994). All translations are my own except where noted.

nify falsity in our words and deeds.² Given this understanding of sin, it is not at all surprising that when asked if it was ever acceptable to lie, Augustine argued that no lie could ever be justified. What finite temporal good could ever justify offending the omnipotent God? Should unjust persecutors come pounding at the door asking for the location of the innocent man I have hidden under the floorboards, I must answer truthfully, and hopefully virtuously, “I know, but I will not tell you!”³

Scholastic theologians and pastoral writers took up Augustine’s absolute prohibition, endlessly repeating it as a principle never to be doubted. Unanimity aside, they recognized, as did Augustine, that it is a hard rule, potentially painful and probably beyond human power perfectly to observe. The result was a tension between moral principle and practical reality that stressed the intellectual coherence of countless *Sentence* commentaries, *Summae*, and all variety of ethical and pastoral treatises. To a man, religious writers proclaimed that every lie is a sin, even as they sought out ways to expand the range of nonmendacious deceptive speech and action.⁴ Needless to say, they often disagreed with one another concerning just where to place the line dividing sinful lies from all other licit forms of deception. Some argued that while we are never allowed to lie, there is certainly no problem with occasionally concealing the truth. Others argued that there was nothing wrong with misleading gestures and expressions. For his part, the Franciscan Duns Scotus suggested that “a powerful motive of charity” might actually justify certain sorts of venial lies.⁵ Beginning in the fifteenth century, Antoninus of Florence, among many others, contended that we could resort to mental reservation to avoid any number of awkward social situations and troublesome moral ones.⁶

For historians of medieval theology, philosophy, and ethics, this is well-trod ground. And though much of the treading has been worth the effort, intellectual historians such as myself need always be wary of imagining that when theologians speak, people listen. Thomas Aquinas may be representative of something, but whatever that something is, it cannot be the totality of medieval attitudes about lying.⁷

² Augustine, *On the Trinity*, bk. 15, chs. 10 and 11 (18–20), ed. Gareth B. Matthews and trans. Stephen McKenna (Cambridge, UK, 2002), 185–88.

³ Augustine, *Against Lying*, ch. 18 (36), in *Treatises on Various Subjects*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari and trans. Harold B. Jaffee (Washington, DC, 1952), 171–72.

⁴ Reflecting on this tradition of debate and discussion, the late fifteenth-century Dominican Sylvester Prierias writes, “I answer that is not even licit to lie for the sake of saving someone’s life as Augustine, Saint Thomas, and all the theologians and canon lawyers teach.” See *Sylvestrinae summae*, pars secunda, *De mendacio et mendace* (Lyons, 1555), fol. 225.

⁵ John Duns Scotus, *In librum tertium Sententiarum*, dist. 38, quest. 1, art. 2, ad. 4, in *John Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (Washington, DC, 1986), 484–85.

⁶ Antoninus of Florence, *Summa theologica*, pars 2, tit. 10, cap. 1 (Venice, 1571), fol. 330v, from the 1740 Verona edition, repr., Graz, 1959.

⁷ Useful studies on—or touching on—medieval attitudes about lying include Frederic Amory, “Whited Sepulchres: The Semantic History of Hypocrisy to the High Middle Ages,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 53 (1986): 5–39; Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *Les pêchés de la langue: Discipline et éthique de la parole dans la culture médiévale*, trans. Philippe Baillet (Paris, 1991), from *I peccati della lingua: Disciplina ed etica della parola nella cultura medievale* (Rome, 1987); Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, UK, 1997); Paul J. Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, 2004); and Dallas

Their own analyses suggest theologians suspected as much. While it was easy for them to assert that every lie is a sin and that we ought never to lie, no matter what the circumstance, medieval theologians apparently found it exceedingly difficult not to consider the real-world contexts and circumstances in which we lie, as if the very logic of lying fragmented any unified ethical principle into a jumble of discrete moral choices each in need of explanation. Augustine himself set the stage for this development when he admitted that not all lies are created equal. For example, lies against the faith are much more heinous, so far as he could see it, than harmless lies told to help a friend. However true, Augustine feared these sorts of speculations could only lead to trouble, tempting us to enter that dangerous moral calculus in which we weigh sin against sin, justifying all manner of moral depravity just so long as we deem the outcome better than the means to achieve it. Best never to lie than to trip oneself up in such moral and spiritual snares, deceiving ourselves that we are like God, capable of judging good from evil, while damning ourselves in the process.⁸

For their part, medieval theologians and intellectuals, writers and poets, constantly risked being snared. In the *Decretals*, Gratian contends that in this convoluted world we might find ourselves in situations in which we have no choice but to sin, no choice but to lie. Quoting Gregory the Great, Gratian writes, “The sinews of the Leviathan’s loins are entangled because the purpose of his suggestions is entangled with tangled devices. Thus, many commit sins because hoping to avoid one, they cannot escape the snare of another.” While the glossators and the entire theological tradition seem to have disagreed with Gratian—disagreed that we could ever find ourselves in a moment of such absolute moral perplexity that we have no choice but to sin—they certainly interested themselves in considering the endless variety of our lies, their hierarchy of sinfulness, and the many reasons that convince us to tell them.⁹

Thinking about lying in the abstract is one thing, but lying really becomes interesting, not to mention morally challenging, when we begin to consider specific lies and their attendant circumstances. Who lied and to whom? When and where and why and how did the person lie? Albert the Great asked whether a person should lie to save their city.¹⁰ Beyond the walls of the university, Christine de Pizan considered it in perfect keeping with true virtue for the princess or noble woman to lie and engage in “just hypocrisy.”¹¹ In Gottfried von Strasburg’s *Tristan*, King Mark looks upon the young and mysterious courtier with awe, wondering what other secret tal-

G. Denery II, *The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 2015).

⁸ Augustine, *On Lying*, ch. 14 (25), 86–88; ch. 21 (42 and 43), 109; and *Against Lying*, ch. 15 (323), 165–66.

⁹ Gratian, *Treaty on Laws with the Ordinary Gloss*, dist. 13, pt. 1, cap. 2.1, trans. Augustine Thompson and James Godley (Washington, DC, 1993), 50; and the gloss at 49. See M. V. Dougherty, *Moral Dilemma in Medieval Thought from Gratian to Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, UK, 2011), for an excellent discussion of Gratian, the glossators, and moral dilemmas.

¹⁰ Albert the Great, *Super Ethica* 4, lectio 14, 288, ed. Wilhelm Kübel, in *Opera omnia ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum edenda*, 37 vols. (Münster, 1951–2015), 14/1 (1968), 288.

¹¹ Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or the Book of the Three Virtues*, trans. Sarah Lawson (London, 2003), 48.

ents his deceptions and lies still keep concealed.¹² And all manner of people, poets, and playwrights wondered if God could lie. After all, how were Christ's actions so different from the devil's? Just like the devil who disguised himself to fool Eve and enslave all mankind, Christ disguised himself as the man Jesus to fool the devil and redeem a sinful race. In *Piers Plowman*, William Langland, repeating what really amounted to little more than common opinion, writes, "And just as man was beguiled by the guiler's guile, so shall grace from which all began finally succeed and beguile the guiler, and that's a good trick, Art to deceive art."¹³ Reflecting on these sorts of problems, the fourteenth-century Dominican Robert Holkot argued that, while God deceives the evil and the good alike, he never lies. To lie, Holkot argues, means to deceive inordinately, but God can do nothing inordinate and so, by definition, God's deceptions are never lies, no matter how he deceives the unwary.¹⁴ So much the better for God, but where does that leave us?

When it comes to lying, the most interesting devil is in the details, and the papers that make up this cluster focus on just those details and circumstances that make lying such a perennial topic of interest and worry. What links these essays is not so much a set of repeated themes as it is an implicit recognition that lying looks different to different people, at different times, in different places.

In his essay, "Consider the Future as Present": The Paranoid World of Kekaumenos," for example, Jake Ransohoff considers one man's response to the deceptive and rumor-filled world of the late eleventh-century Byzantine court in which all power resides in the capricious hands of the emperor. Surrounded on all sides by untrustworthy men and women, Kekaumenos counsels silence and, should we need to speak, judicious care, lest a moment's thoughtless remark be turned against us. Even such a hoary bit of moral advice as "Beware of drinking parties!" takes on ominous undertones when placed within the context of Byzantine intrigue in which casual words, twisted into falsehoods, can all too easily reach the emperor's ears.

From court to town and from east to west, Susan Einbinder, in "Your Words Are the Truth": Rabbi Qalonymous and Archbishop Ruthard of Mainz," takes up the problem of trust, one of lying's first victims. In his chronicle of the 1096 slaughter of Mainz's Jewish population, Solomon bar Simson recounts the final days of the unlikely friendship between Rabbi Qalonymous bar Meshullam and Archbishop Ruthard, who has promised to protect the city's Jews from the oncoming armies of the First Crusade. As Einbinder notes, the standard Jewish trope of Jewish truth versus Christian dishonesty flips as the archbishop, recognizing the impossibility of making good his promise, pleads with Qalonymous to recognize that God wills that there be no "saving remnant" of Jews. The rabbi, unwilling or unable to see the divine truth that renders the archbishop's promise impossible to keep, enraged or distraught at the coming catastrophe, may or may not have attempted to kill his

¹² Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan with the "Tristan" of Thomas*, trans. A. T. Hatto, rev. ed. (London, 1967), 90.

¹³ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-Text*, passus XX, line 163–65, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter, 2008), 329.

¹⁴ Robert Holkot, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, 2, quest. 2, in *Seeing the Future Clearly: Questions on Future Contingents*, ed. Paul A. Streveler and Katherine H. Tachau (Toronto, 1995), 156.

friend. Solomon, offering no fixed conclusion to his narrative, leaves much up in air, including whether the sheer possibility of deception renders impossible any real friendship across the religious divide.

Theologians had long asked themselves why Eve, a woman and, for that very reason, obviously skittish, did not run off in terror when a talking snake confronted her in the Garden of Eden. Nancy Caciola, in “Serpents and Lies,” picks up Peter Comestor’s surprisingly influential contribution to this ongoing bit of misogynistic musing. In the *Historia scholastica*, Peter contends that the serpent must have appeared with a “virgin’s face, for like praises like.” This iconography became something of a commonplace for the next several centuries, appearing in numerous treatises, illuminations, paintings, and carvings, including on the late twelfth-century façade of Notre-Dame. In the early thirteenth century, William of Auvergne gave theological backbone to Comestor’s innovation and, in so doing, set in place the literal identification of the devil with the female body, an identification that would yield bloody fruit during the witch craze.

The final two papers turn from the world to the written page, to literature and logic, and to the deceiving nature of language itself. A popular definition of lying focuses on intention—a lie is a false statement made with the intention of deceiving. But, as Jamie Taylor notes in “Lies, Puns, Tallies: Marital and Material Deceit in Langland and Chaucer,” words themselves are slippery, equivocal, capable of exceeding or wandering from their speaker’s intentions, becoming all the more wayward when wholly separated from their author on the written page. Focusing on Langland’s and Chaucer’s exploitation of the many meanings of the Middle English verb *taille*, Taylor explores the intended and unintended meanings and deceptions that accompany all speech.

Which leaves us with the Liar Paradox, a topic deceptive enough to make the editors of *Speculum* think it has something to do with lying and Gyula Klima to claim it doesn’t. As Klima notes in “The Medieval Liar,” the Liar Paradox has nothing to do with the speaker’s intention to deceive and everything to do with the logical problem of statements that assert their own falsity (e.g., “I am a liar”). In other words, it isn’t about lying at all. Unsurprisingly, matters are not quite so straightforward. Whether lying requires an intention to deceive is an open question, at least for some people. Augustine seemed to doubt it and Aquinas, following Augustine, did as well. As Aquinas argues, deception “does not belong to the species of lying” but to its perfection.¹⁵ For both thinkers, the intention to state something believed to be false is what makes a lie a lie. But this is all the better for Klima, whose deft and nuanced analysis of a particularly paradoxical semantic problem forces us to think more deeply about the extent to which language itself might lead us into deception and incoherence. As Klima concludes, the paradox’s medieval commentators, in particular the fourteenth-century Parisian master John Buridan, have much to teach present-day logicians.

Which leaves us where we began.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, quest. 110, art. 1, resp., 1664. Griffiths, *Lying*, offers the best analysis of lying and its relation to intention in both Augustine and Thomas.

We are all liars, despite and because of ourselves. Whether we attribute this inescapable fact of human existence to natural or demonic causes may well effect how we evaluate our lies, but probably not our belief in their ubiquity. And if lies really are everywhere, surrounding us and forming us, then, as these papers demonstrate, there may well be no limit to the ways we might begin to make sense of them, use them, and uncover them.

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2. "CONSIDER THE FUTURE AS PRESENT": THE PARANOID WORLD OF KEKAUMENOS

By Jake Ransohoff

I.

1066 was a bad year not just for Harold Godwinson. That year Nikoulitzas Delphinus traveled to Constantinople to warn the emperor of a rebellion, but the emperor "instructed him to be silent."¹ Undeterred, Nikoulitzas went home and "wrote to the emperor, <describing> this entire conspiracy."² He received no response. Nikoulitzas considered arresting the conspirators himself, but feared that the emperor, enraged by his insolence, "would burn his home . . . , murder his two sons, and his two brothers . . . and his daughters, and, after leading him into [Constantinople], would leave him to suffer."³ As Nikoulitzas imagined these terrors, the conspirators approached him with a surprising offer: to lead their rebellion himself. They made a persuasive argument—join or die.⁴ Reluctantly, Nikoulitzas acquiesced. Even then he wrote to the emperor, pleading loyalty and explaining how the rebels had "imposed their evil plot on him."⁵ This time the emperor responded, promising

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¹ Kekaumenos, *Consilia et narrationes*, ed. Charlotte Roueché, *Sharing Ancient Wisdoms* (London, 2013), 66, line 23: <http://www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/kekaumenos-consilia-et-narrationes/>. This critical edition, translation, and commentary is published online. Page and line numbers refer to the editio princeps of the text: *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris de officiis regii libellus*, ed. Basil Wasiliewsky [Vasilij Vasil'evskij] and Victor Jernstedt [Viktor Ernstedt] (St. Petersburg, 1896), but Roueché has made editorial changes. Cf. the recent printed critical edition *Kekaumenos: Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo (Stratēgikon)*, ed. and trans. Maria Spadaro (Alessandria, 1998), 208, lines 12–13. Spadaro, 29–32, rejects Kekaumenos's authorship of what Roueché calls books 6 ("Miscellanea") and 7 ("Consilium principii") and omits them from her edition. All translations of Kekaumenos come from Roueché; page and line numbers are given for both Roueché ("R") and Spadaro ("S").

² R 67.7–8 (S 206.20–21).

³ R 67.25–68.1 (S 208.13–17).

⁴ R 69.22–23 (S 212.20–21).

⁵ R 69.25 (S 212.23–24).