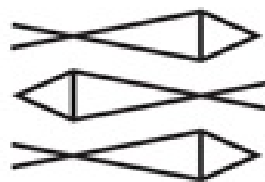


# LOVE AND LIES

AN ESSAY ON TRUTHFULNESS, DECEIT,  
AND THE GROWTH AND CARE  
OF EROTIC LOVE

CLANCY MARTIN



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Love  
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*For my parents:*

Anna Victoria Moody

John William Martin (1940–1997)

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Copyright

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*Lie to me*

*I promise, I'll believe*

*Lie to me*

*But please don't leave.*

—Sheryl Crow

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## Prologue: Why I Wrote This Book

My wife, Amie, and I were lying in bed that morning, being lazy and reading. It was a Monday morning, so we both should have been up working, but we weren't ready for the weekend to be over. We were in Iowa City—my wife was at the Writers' Workshop—and spring had arrived at last. It was lovely with the tulips and the swollen river and the very sudden arrival of such a late spring. I had just finished a book, and she was in the middle of hers. "Okay, I'm getting up," I said, and she said, "No, let's stay in bed a little longer," and dug another book out of the big tin steamer—a kind of old sailor's trunk—that she keeps at the end of the bed. She gave me the book. It was William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. I knew about his reputation as an editor but, I am a bit embarrassed to admit, had never read any of his writing. I didn't want to read the book because I did not know his name and something about the title bothered me. Also, I sometimes have the stupid, arrogant idea that if I have not heard of a book, it's probably not very good.

The book opens with the account of a shooting. Then Maxwell's narrator goes back to his own childhood, which was very much like my own—bookish, the middle of three brothers, raised by his own parent and a stepparent he could never accept. His narrator seemed to understand that feeling of confusion that characterized my own childhood. I was drawn into the book; I had that exhilarating feeling—the best feeling we can get, perhaps, from reading—of encountering a long-lost friend, someone whom I would never meet (Maxwell died in 2000, at the age of ninety-two), but who saw the world through eyes similar to my own, who felt some of the things I had felt; I had that feeling of being not so alone in the world as I was before I opened the book. Then I came to this passage:

What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw.

"Listen to this," I said to my wife, and read it to her.

"Well, maybe you guys lie about the past," she said, "but not me." She is a very intelligent, very funny person, my wife.

There are many books, like Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, or Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*, or Stendhal's *Love*, that may in a more artistic way capture what I try to say in a more analytical way here in this little book of my own. One way of restating my own thesis would be to say with Maxwell: "In talking about love we lie with every breath we draw." But obviously for Maxwell and me talking about the past and talking about love are also how we get to the truth of things. Talking



about the past, like talking about love, is not so much lying as it is trying to tell a story that must be told and cannot be told any other way—telling the truth, but telling it slant, as Emily Dickinson famously recommends. Perhaps the truth we are trying to get at could be told in many different ways, none of which would be nakedly factual. In any case, what we mean by “telling the truth” is itself much more complicated than we normally pretend it to be, particularly when we’re talking about the past and about love.

Furthermore, for most of us, we can’t talk about love without also talking about our pasts. In the prologue and throughout this book, I will be talking about my past in order both to illustrate how I came to be fascinated with the interconnections of love and lying and to provide concrete examples for the arguments I make: to provide grist for the philosophical mill. Consequently, this book is part memoir, part self-psychoanalytic analysis, part philosophical argument, and, because many of the most fascinating lovers are in literature, part literary criticism. Here and there a little science also finds its way in, because much of the most interesting recent research on deception is being done in experiments and laboratories.

\* \* \*

When I was twelve or so, my mother found some *Penthouse* magazines under my bed. When she confronted me with them, I lied, and said: “Dad gave them to me.” I had recently returned from home in Miami—we lived in Calgary, Alberta—and it was a plausible fib.

When my mother called my father to confront him, he said, “Clancy has some difficulty when it comes to the truth.”

“Well, at least he comes by it honestly,” my mother said, and hung up on him.

My father was a great storyteller. So is my mother, and for a long time I believed both of their stories were true, even when they disagreed. It was perhaps for this reason that it was natural to me when, later in life, I encountered the philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom argue that truth is a matter of one’s perspective, that not only will different people see the truth differently but also the truth itself may vary from person to person. This way of thinking about truth doesn’t work very well with statements like “ $7 + 5 = 12$ ”; it looks as though we’d all better agree about the truth of that claim, if we understand the claim at all. But it works much better with statements like “We were meant to be together, son” or “Your father and I were never happy” or “I’ll never love another woman” or “The marriage could never work” or “That was the best year we ever had.” Statements that we genuinely care about, in short, are the ones in which their truth looks as if they were involved with the perspective of the narrator. “Subjectivity is truth,” Kierkegaard provocatively wrote, under a pseudonym (thus showing that he was speaking from a particular perspective); what he sometimes think he intended by this was “Subjectivity is *meaning*.” My perspective, my truth, is inextricably bound up with what I find to be meaningful.

When I say, for example, that it’s true that I love my daughters or that I love my wife, I couldn’t attempt to specify the truth conditions that govern that claim. I can’t point to the truth of it in the way that I can point to the truth that “The apple is on the table.” Furthermore, the fact that I love the girls seems to be an importantly different kind of fact from the fact that the apple is on the table. That the

apple is on the table is fundamentally a matter of indifference to me. It's the sort of fact that is easily demonstrated to be true, but I don't care that much about it, even if I'm hungry. That I love my children and my wife is the kind of fact that is of the utmost importance to me. But it's also the sort of fact that is private to me, though naturally I hope they know it too. And it would be difficult, perhaps impossible to "prove" that I love them in the way I could prove that the apple is on the table. The truth or fact of my love is subjective; the truth or fact of the apple's being on the table is objective. The crucial difference between the two sorts of facts is that my love for my wife and children is part of the world of those truths that matter most to me, that give my life meaning, that define who I am and how I inhabit the world. And I am involved with those facts or truths in an active way, in which I am not particularly involved with the fact about the apple. If I die today, my love for my wife and my children goes with me, but that darned apple stays right where it is. This requirement of my active participation with the truth of my love is part of why it is meaningful to me; it is also part of why this kind of truth—the truth of my love—is much more complex, slippery, and interesting than the usual sort of truth or fact.

Here's a story from early in my first marriage (I've been married three times) that will help illustrate just how complicated and tricky these sorts of subjective truths are. Again, I want to emphasize that these subjective truths are the most important sorts of truths for us.

It was a spring afternoon in Nazaré, a little fishing town on the Portuguese coast. I was vacationing with my first wife. We'd been married for about a year and were living in Copenhagen. I was trying to write a dissertation on Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* but was in fact just going to the Royal Library every day and turning the delicate pages of two-hundred-year-old manuscripts that, despite my years of studying Danish, I couldn't really read. I took notes for a book that would never be written. But we'd decided to get away, and Portugal was cheap then, and it was a sunny break from the dreary weather of Denmark in March.

We'd taken a funicular—a little, meticulously crafted mahogany car on narrow train tracks and cables, with old cracked-leather seats and windows that louvered open—up the side of the mountain to a peak. We stood near the edge of the cliff, holding hands, and watched the waves breaking against the rocks hundreds of feet below. Then the funicular man gestured, we saw the sky—enormous black thunderheads were coming in swiftly from the sea—and all of us, a dozen or so, maybe fewer, crowded back into the funicular for the ride down. The storm broke. The little car rocked in the rain, we closed the windows. We laughed and cried out as the lightning struck. At the bottom we all ran down the cobblestoned, high-curved seaport streets for our little hotels or guesthouses—it was out of season, and the one big hotel was closed—and my wife and I accidentally passed our house.

"Let's get something to eat!" I shouted—we both were soaking wet, and the pouring warm rain as heavy as standing in the shower, was rushing down the streets higher than our ankles—and we ran, still holding hands, down almost to the beach, where we saw a light under an awning and a tiny restaurant crowded with Portuguese. It was not much larger than a large hotel room, and they squeezed us in on one of the benches and brought us bread and red wine. Almost everyone was wet, but it was warm from the bodies. They brought us huge bowls of fish stew. The main fish in the stew was entirely still had its head, tail, and eyes. The room was smoky from cooking and lit with candles. W

couldn't understand what people were saying or laughing about. The stew was too fishy for me, but I ate it, and I looked up at my wife, thinking, "This is the most romantic moment in my life. It will never be more romantic than this." Her face was twisted into that sad frown she used to make, and when she saw me looking into her eyes, she started to cry. "I don't want this stew. I want to go home," she said. I waved the woman over—she was cooking in plain sight—and paid our check. She was worried that we didn't like the stew, and I gulped down my wine and tried to explain that we were just wet and tired.

This event meant more to me than a simple miscommunication between a young husband and wife, and helps illustrate what Kierkegaard means by the claim that "Subjectivity is truth" or I mean by "Subjectivity is meaning." My experience of that rainstorm in Portugal was that it was one of the most intensely romantic experiences of my life, until I abruptly realized that my wife was experiencing it entirely differently. In his *Discourse on the Passion of Love* Pascal puts the same point nicely: "A true or false pleasure can equally fill the mind. For what matters it that this pleasure is false, if we are persuaded that it is true?"

Both experiences, both the romance and the disappointment that followed it, had their unique truthfulness. I still nostalgically remember that rocking funicular and that run down the flooding cobblestoned streets. When I talk to my ex-wife about it now, she also remembers it as a beautiful moment in our early marriage (she has entirely forgotten the fish stew incident). And I also will never forget how intensely close I felt to my wife, until I suddenly, vertiginously understood how far apart at that moment, our experience actually was. Then the whole event took on a new meaning. None of the "facts" of the afternoon had changed, but the way it mattered to me, the meaning of it all, its "truth," was fundamentally altered.

That sounds solipsistic, and it should: we can never get all the way inside each other's heads, no matter how much we love each other. Interestingly, much of the story I tell here will illustrate that love is simply the long journey we make from our early identification with another human being (usually a parent, commonly our mothers) to the recognition that we are fundamentally separate from others and our subsequent creative attempts to return to that state of union. To love is to try to transcend the boundaries of our own minds. It seems like an impossible project, and yet we manage to accomplish it over and over again. How we do it, and that it requires not only truthfulness but also deception and self-deception, are the subject of this book. In fact, every time you lie, like every time you love, you are engaged in a kind of projection of your own mind into another's.

\* \* \*

But let me be honest, there's more to my interest in love and deception than my philosophical fascination with the subject. I've long had a practical interest in deception because I spent seven years of my life as a professional liar.

Ever since I was a kid, I'd struggled with telling the truth. But the jewelry business was my graduate school in the dark arts of confabulation, prevarication, secrecy, and misdirection.

Here's that story. A few months after the trip to Portugal, I decided to drop out of graduate school and join my older brother as partner in his luxury jewelry store. When I did it, I decided to burn all my

bridges. I didn't fill out any forms. I didn't have the ordinary courtesy even to contact my two dissertation directors, Robert C. Solomon and Louis H. Mackey. I simply vanished.

I told myself that it was a conscious strategy, to prevent myself from going back, but I also knew the truth: that I was simply too ashamed to tell them that I had gone into business for the money. Like many of our deceptions—both of ourselves and of others—mine was motivated by cowardice: “Tell the people what they want to hear,” or if you can't do that, simply don't tell them anything at all.

A few years later my next-door neighbor (my first wife and I had just moved in) caught me in the driveway and asked, “Hey, Clancy. Did you go to grad school at the University of Texas?”

“I did, that's right.” I was already uncomfortable. I opened the door of my convertible. The Texas summer sun frowned cruelly down on me.

“I'm an editor of Bob Solomon's. He told me to say hello.”

Busted. This was Solomon's way of calling me on my bullshit. It was his personal and philosophical motto, adopted from Sartre: “No excuses!” Take responsibility for your actions. Above all, avoid bad faith. Look at yourself in the mirror and accept—if possible, embrace—the person that you are.

But I was on my way to the jewelry store, and Bob Solomon, at that point in my life, was the leader of my problems. I had him stored neatly in the mental safety-deposit box of “people I had not lied to but had betrayed in a related way.”

I often think, now, of that decision to leave graduate school to go into the jewelry business. Being a professor, I have since learned, plays to my strengths: curiosity, the love of reading and writing, and storytelling. Selling jewelry, by contrast, played to all my weaknesses, because the jewelry business depends on the art of creating illusions. The vast majority of jewelry has no inherent value; the salesperson must create the perception of value. It is, in this way and in many others, a business that encourages deception. I used deception to take the easy way out of selling. I was too eager to please my customers. When we were in trouble with the bank, there was always some lie I could invent to sell my way into a quick deal and easy cash from one of my regulars. I was miserable most of the time, but I told myself that this was how business was done.

The jewelry business—like many other businesses, especially those that depend on selling—lends itself to lies. (I should add that my brothers, both in the jewelry business today, are two of the most scrupulously honest people I know.) It's hard to make money selling used Rolexes as what they are, but if you clean one up and make it look new, suddenly there's a little profit in the deal. Grading diamonds is in many ways a matter of opinion, and the better a diamond looks to you when you're grading it, the more money it's worth—as long as you can convince your customer that it's the grade you're selling it as. Here's an easy, effective way to do that: first lie to yourself about what grade the diamond is; then you can sincerely tell your customer “the truth” about what it's worth.

As I would tell my salespeople, if you want to be an expert deceiver, master the art of self-deception. People will believe you when they see that you yourself are deeply convinced. It sounds difficult to do, but in fact it's easy; we are already experts at lying to ourselves. We believe just what we want to believe. And the customer will help in this process because she or he wants the diamond—where else can I get such a good deal on such a high-quality stone?—to be a certain size and quality.

The customer wants to believe just as much as the salesperson does. At the same time, he or she does not want to pay the price that the actual diamond, were it what you claimed it to be, would cost. The transaction is a collaboration of lies and self-deceptions.

Pretend you are selling a piece of jewelry, a useless thing, small, easily lost, that is also grossly expensive. I, your customer, wander into the store. Pretend to be polishing the showcases. Watch to see what is catching my eye. Stand back; let me prowl a bit. I will come back to a piece or two; something will draw me. You wait for and then seize the moment when you recognize the spark of allure—all great selling is a form of seduction. Now make your approach. Take a bracelet from the showcase that is near, but not too near, the piece I am interested in. Admire it; polish it with a gold cloth; comment quietly, appraisingly on it. You're still ignoring me, your customer. Now, almost as though talking to yourself, take the piece I like from the showcase: "Now this is a piece of jewelry. I love this piece." Suddenly you see me there. "Isn't this a beautiful thing? The average person wouldn't even notice this. But if you're in the business, if you really know what to look for, a piece like this is why people wear fine jewelry. This is what a connoisseur looks for." If it's a gold rope chain, a stainless steel Rolex, or something else very common and mundane, you'll have to finesse the line a bit.

From there it's easy. Use a mixture of the several kinds of lies Aristotle identified in *Nicomachean Ethics*: a good blend of subtle flattery, understatement, humorous boastfulness, playful storytelling, and gentle irony will establish that "you're one of us, and I'm one of you." We are alike; we are friends; we can trust each other.

The problem is, once lying to your customer as a way of doing business becomes habitual, it reaches like a weed into other areas of your business and then into your personal life. Soon the instrument of pleasing people becomes the goal of pleasing people. For example, who *wouldn't* want to buy a high-quality one-carat diamond for just three thousand dollars? (Such a diamond would cost forty-five hundred to ten thousand, retail, depending on where you bought it.) But you can't make a profit selling that diamond for three thousand dollars; you can't even buy one wholesale for that amount. Since the customer can't tell the difference anyway, why not make your profit and please the customer by simply misrepresenting the merchandise? "But that's deceptive trade! There are laws against that!" There's a body of federal law, in fact: the Uniform Deceptive Trade Practices Act. Texas awards triple damages plus attorney's fees to the successful plaintiff. "Aren't you worried about criminal—or at least civil—consequences? And how do you look at yourself in the mirror before you go to bed at night?"

During my bleakest days in business, when I felt like taking a Zen monk's vow of silence so that not a single lie would escape my lips, I often took a long lunch and drove to a campus—Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, the University of Texas at Arlington—to see the college kids outside, reading books or holding hands or kissing in the sunshine or hurrying to class and to reassure myself that there was a place where life made sense, where people were happy and thinking about something other than profit, where people still believed that truth mattered and were even in pursuit of it. (Yes, I was a bit naive about academic life.)

I was in the luxury jewelry business for nearly seven years, and though I don't believe in the

existence of a soul, exactly, I came to understand what people mean when they say you are losing your soul. The lies I told in my business life migrated. Soon I was lying to my wife. The habit of telling people what they wanted to hear became the easiest way to navigate my way through any day. They don't call it the cold, hard truth without reason: flattering falsehoods are like a big, expensive comforter.

It seemed that I could do what I wanted without ever suffering the consequences of my actions, as long as I created the appearance that people wanted to see. It took intellectual effort. I grew skinnier, I needed more and more cocaine to keep all my lies straight. And then, one morning, I realized that I had been standing in the "executive bathroom" (reserved for my brother and me) at the marble sink in front of a large gilt Venetian mirror every morning for days, with my Glock in my mouth. I still remember the oily taste of that barrel. Before I confronted the fact that I was trying to kill myself, I had probably put that gun in my mouth, oh, I don't know, twenty, thirty times. I said, "Enough."

I called my old mentor Robert C. Solomon. That was in May 2000.

I was relieved when he didn't answer his phone. I left a message. "I'm sorry, Dr. Solomon. I'd like to come back to graduate school." Words to that effect, but at much greater length. I think the beep came off.

When he called back, I was too frightened to pick up. I listened to his voice mail message. He said, "Clancy, this is not a good time to make yourself difficult to get hold of."

I called again. He let me off easy. (He was one of the most generous people I've ever known.) He caught him up with the past seven years of my life. He told me to call him Bob, not Dr. Solomon. "We're past that." Then he said, "So, why do you want to come back?"

"I want to finish what I started, Bob."

"That's a lousy reason. Try again."

"I need to make a living that's not in business. I hate being a businessman, Bob."

"So be a lawyer. Be a doctor. You'll make a lot more money than in philosophy. It's not easy to get a job as a professor these days, Clancy."

"It's the one thing I really enjoyed. Philosophy was the only thing that ever truly interested me. And I have some things I want to figure out."

"Now you're talking. Like what? What are you thinking about?"

"Lying."

He was quiet for a few seconds.

"Lying is interesting. Deception? Or self-deception? Or, I'm guessing, both?"

"Exactly. Both. How they work together."

With the help of a couple of other professors who remembered me fondly, in the fall semester of 2000 Bob Solomon brought me back to the philosophy doctoral program at Austin, and I started working on a dissertation titled "Nietzsche on Deception."

I went to work on deception not because I wanted to learn how to lie better—I had mastered that twisted skill, as far as I was concerned—but because I wanted to cure myself of being a liar. What had begun as a morally pernicious technique had become a character-defining vice. I had to save myself. I needed to understand the knots I had tied myself into before I could begin to untangle them.

It seems like an odd solution now. But in fact it's an old idea: the Delphic injunction "Know thyself" is an epistemological duty with moral muscle, intended for a therapeutic purpose. Throughout the history of philosophy, until quite recently, it was thought that the practice of philosophy should have a powerful impact on the philosopher's life, even, ideally, on the lives of others. So I studied deception and self-deception, how they collaborate with each other, why they are so common, what harms they might do, and when, in fact, they may be both useful and necessary. The more work I did on the subject, the more I realized that deception was much more complicated than I had initially supposed. I also learned that it was much more common than I had thought—in short, that everyone practiced lying and other forms of deception and often for morally legitimate reasons. I was never so naive or narcissistic that I supposed I was the only liar out there in the world plying my false wares. But I hadn't realized how pervasive deception was, and I hadn't thought about how necessary and valuable it can be. I also hadn't realized how closely interwoven deception of others is with deception of oneself.

Because deception of others and self-deception so often collaborate, and because we will be working with these concepts throughout the book, let me quickly distinguish the two. This is a rough distinction, which we will refine as we proceed. When I deceive someone else, I persuade some other person that something I believe to be false is true. When I deceive myself, I persuade myself that something I believe to be false is true. The former act—deception of others—is relatively easy because I can hide the contents of my head from the person I am trying to deceive. The latter act—self-deception—ought to be impossible, as we normally suppose that we can't hide our own thoughts from ourselves. But the truth of the matter is that we are experts at hiding our thoughts from ourselves, and we are probably even better at deceiving ourselves than we are at deceiving other people. Perhaps that shouldn't come as a surprise, since we know ourselves better than we know other people, and so we know which buttons to push and levers to pull to get ourselves to believe what we want to believe, regardless of its truthfulness.

Briefly consider the example that, in many different ways, will occupy us for the rest of this book: falling in love. Who hasn't asked, when falling in love, "But am I making all this up?" When we are falling in love with someone, we engage in so many and such a variety of misrepresentation, evasions, creative manipulations, and often straightforward lies. ("How many people have you slept with?") Not to mention the self-deceptions, both in how we see the person we are falling in love with and about ourselves. As Erving Goffman famously argues in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, we are always "presenting ourselves," playing a part, acting a role, selling ourselves: and how much more so when love is at stake. Chris Rock gets it exactly right in his joke "When you meet someone new, you aren't meeting that person; you're meeting his agent."

Here's another way of thinking about the complexities of deception, especially in love: try making a list of all the people you love to whom you've never told a lie. Maybe that's not fair to ask; it's not so easy to make a list of people you've never lied to, period, much less the same list focused on people you love. So try making a list of—or merely stop and think a moment about—the people you lie to most often. It's an uncomfortable question: Whom do I lie to the most? For the majority of us, we lie most to the people we love most. Why that might be the case is fascinating. Because for thousands

years, at least since Plato taught in the *Symposium* that love is a ladder that leads us to the truth, or culture has supposed that intimacy and truthfulness go hand in hand. Of course in many instances they do. And yet while we are holding the beloved by one truthful hand, we're using the other hand, fingers crossed, to hold on with deception.

Once while I was delivering a lecture on this subject to a large, mixed crowd at a university, a woman who must have been in her late seventies or early eighties raised her hand and said: "So I tell it you think we lie a lot to our relatives?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"But my sister is the only person on earth I always tell the truth to," she said.

"And how do you get along with your sister?" I asked her.

"Oh, I hate that bitch," she said. Everyone laughed, and she smiled too, but she wasn't joking.

\* \* \*

So in part this book is my attempt to summarize much of what I've spent the last thirteen years learning, as an academic, about deception. More important, it's what I've spent the past forty-five years learning about how deception works in love, which I take to be, for most of us, one of the highest values in life. This book is about my truth, my perspective, my meaning, my life. It is my attempt to make sense of my own life within the context of whom and how I have loved, the ways in which truth and deception have played into those loves, and why, at the end of the day, I believe so deeply in the value of love. I rarely talk about my children in this book or why and how we love our kids because, well, they are my kids. I do discuss why part of loving our children includes lying to them and also why we should accept that they will—indeed, often should—lie to us.

"A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory," Keats writes. The worth of all of our lives seems to be in the people we love and try to love—and try to love well or love better—and the allegory is worth a good-natured investigation. I should add that none of this will work—the reading or the writing, the loving of ourselves or of others—if we don't try to keep our sense of humor. As Baudelaire observes, a bit humorlessly, sounding very much like a Buddhist, and thinking of his own life explicitly as an allegory ("in this allegory," he writes): "Lord give me strength and courage to behold my body and my heart without disgust!"

Imagine a samurai who was the worst warrior ever to carry a sword. This samurai was so bad that he couldn't take his sword from its sheath without accidentally slicing himself or someone he cared about. So he decided to write a book titled *How to Be a Samurai*.

Why did I write this book? I guess, at age forty-six, standing at a crossroads in my life—this book began when I was married to my second wife, continued through a yearlong affair and a two-year divorce, and now has been completed two years into my third marriage—I am trying to figure out how I've loved and how to do it better. More brutally put—and more honestly?—I am trying to behold my body and my heart without disgust. Along the way I hope to familiarize myself and you, my reader, with what I think we both already know: how intimately deception and self-deception have informed our conceptions of love from childhood forward. I think the greatest threat to a mature and enduring conception of erotic love—the reason, in short, that I think we still ought to marry or engage in long



term monogamous romantic partnerships—is the popular, thoughtless idea that genuine love depends upon absolute truthfulness (with either the beloved or oneself). It is this cultural myth, which comes with our Greco-Judeo-Christian heritage, that makes for so many unhappy love affairs and disastrous divorces. Curiously, then, I am arguing in defense of lies in the service of the truth. Let's be honest about our lying. Then we will be better able to love.

The story I tell develops in five stages. In the first chapter I give the reader a bit of the history of philosophical thinking about lying and deception in order to provide us with some of the tools we will use in the subsequent discussion. In the second chapter I examine how we learn to lie and to love our children; our first attempts at loving are inextricably interwoven, I show, with our first attempts at lying. In the third chapter I look at our first great direct encounter with perhaps the most powerful psychological force in human psychological life—self-deception—and how it influences our earliest attempts at romantic love (so-called first love). In chapter 4 I examine the wildly complex phenomenon of deception in erotic love. Finally, in the fifth and final chapter, I show how self-deception and deception of each other in marital love, when practiced by thoughtful experts, can make enduring romantic love possible.

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## 1. A Brief Introduction to the Morality of Deception

These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

—Proverbs 6:16–19

Everything is deception: the question is whether to seek the least amount of deception, or the mean, or to seek out the highest.

—Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*

### THE PREVALENCE OF DECEIT

The younger a child is when she starts to lie, the more likely she is to succeed and the more intelligent she is likely to be. In studies in which children have been observed in social interactions, four-year-olds lied at least once every two hours, while six-year-olds lied at least once every ninety minutes. Children who lie frequently are generally more intelligent than their peers, and the capacity to lie convincingly is a reliable predictor of social and financial success among adults. More intelligent adults lie more often and more skillfully. Conservative estimates show that people lie at least once a day. Other recent psychological studies have shown that Ivy League university students (perhaps not the most truthful sample of the population) lie as many as forty times per day, and the most successful college students lie about their GPAs more often than their less successful peers—despite the fact that the liars consistently have higher GPAs than the truth tellers. When confronted with their deception, the high GPA liars reported that they did not consider themselves to be lying so much as “reporting future truth.” (When asked about their current GPAs, apparently they tended to reply with the GPA they expected themselves to have in the not-too-distant future.) In yet another study, two strangers were asked to have a conversation for ten minutes; on average, each person in the conversation told three lies in that much time. To make things messier still, other recent research has shown that most of the times we are telling a lie we don’t realize that we are doing so, probably because it is to our evolutionary advantage if we think we are telling the truth when lying (think how much more successful you are at bluffing if you don’t know that you’re bluffing).

Nevertheless, most of us have been taught since we were children that it is always wrong to lie. We mistakenly think that “Lying is always wrong” is written in the Ten Commandments. Honesty is in fact addressed in the ninth commandment, but it only recommends the much more modest and reasonable claim that we “do not bear false witness against our neighbors.” If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we all tell lies—probably more often than we’d like to admit—and that more interestingly, often we do so for good reasons.

First we should notice that there is a difference between what we actually do and what we ought

do. Suppose that most of us do eat oysters. It doesn't follow from that fact that we *ought* to eat oysters. This is the difference, often insisted upon in moral philosophy (but also as often attacked) between facts and values. In Aristotle's time, nearly all Athenian citizens owned slaves; again, it does not follow from that fact that they ought to have owned slaves.

So even if we agree that it is true that most of us do lie quite frequently, it doesn't follow from that fact that we ought to lie as often as we do. Contemporary psychology, economics, and evolutionary biology have collectively destroyed the old Judeo-Christian cultural conviction that most of us don't lie most of the time. But whether or not deception is *morally* wrong remains a compelling question.

It's interesting that we lie so often and easily, because as a rule other moral prohibitions are not so commonly, comfortably, and recognizably flouted. We all agree that it's usually wrong to steal, and most of us follow this moral rule; stealing is an exceptional event in the average human life. We all agree that it's wrong to take another human life, except, perhaps, under extraordinary conditions like war or self-defense, and most of us happily never have and never will kill another human being.

So one question is: Given the general consensus that lying is wrong, why is it so commonly practiced? Another question is: Are there circumstances in which it is appropriate to lie? Because there are, then we might be operating under a kind of collective hypocrisy about deception in everyday life, and collective hypocrisies are at least worth examining more closely. Indeed, as a rule, we think that collective hypocrisies are morally dangerous and should be vigorously exposed.

It is with this cognitive dissonance in mind—the conflict between how commonly we lie and the fact that we generally profess that it is wrong to do so—that I often ask my students: “Is there anyone in here who has never told a lie?” With younger students, there are usually several hands, and I let the other students do the work of showing the ways in which their fellow students must have lied—to such questions as, for example, How are you today? Or, Do you like my new haircut? Or, Did you make it to all your classes today? Or, Why was your paper late? But I was particularly fascinated when on one occasion I asked mid-career business professionals in an MBA class the same question. Usually most adult students won't take the bait. In this instance a fifty-something man raised his hand and said: “All my life I've never told a single lie.” Another student about the same age immediately replied, “Well, congratulations, you just told one.” Nevertheless, the first student, who was an accountant, insisted that he had never told a lie, even for the sake of politeness, not even as a child to his parents. He was happy to admit that everyone else lied quite often. He just happened to be the exception to the rule.

For all I or anyone else in the classroom knew, he was telling the truth. But I think we all suspected the same thing: that this was a man who was particularly deeply entrenched in a self-deceptive self-image that, for whatever complex psychological reasons, simply couldn't accept the possibility that he had ever told a lie. The reason I mention this case is that it struck me, as it clearly struck many other people in the room, as disturbing. The dogmatic insistence that one has never told a lie in his or her life is obviously false. As Mark Twain remarked, “A man is never more truthful than when he acknowledges himself as a liar.” But the fact that this particular statement, “I've never told a lie,” is blatantly false, indeed, self-contradictory—so much so that we suspect it might even be a sign of a kind of mental or psychological imbalance in the person who protests it—shows that we are mo

realistic about ourselves as liars than we pretend to be. This fact about us as liars—that we know we lie, but we don't like to admit it—will be important for our thinking in the pages ahead.

We should also remember the importance of truthfulness. In the movie *Liar, Liar*, the character played by Jim Carrey, an incorrigible liar, who lies for a living, finds himself suddenly incapable of lying, and we all quickly realize that it is impossible to engage in everyday life without lying, at least now and then. At the same time, over the course of the movie, the hero realizes that there are certain goods, like trust and intimacy, that are available only if we try to be honest most of the time.

In the ethics of our everyday lives, most absolute moral prohibitions—such as “Never kill a human being”—don't come up, because we don't find ourselves in those kinds of situations. But an absolute moral prohibition such as “Never tell a lie,” whether it's offered by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the insect philosopher Jiminy Cricket, or the young George Washington after he (fictionally) chopped down the cherry tree is the sort of claim we need to examine more closely because we want to do the right thing, for the right reasons, as often as we can.

So I want to take a closer look at the popular notion that lying is wrong. In this chapter, before we get to the tough subject of lying and love, I'll first discuss several philosophers who argue that it is okay to lie at least some of the time. Then I will turn to several philosophers who argue that it is always wrong, or almost always wrong, ever to lie. Finally, I will discuss a few philosophers who argue that when and why it is right or wrong to lie depends upon a variety of considerations and careful thinking about the kinds of situations we find ourselves in.

## SOMETIMES WE OUGHT TO LIE

Plato was the first philosopher in the Western tradition who argued that sometimes we must tell lies and for good reasons. He argues in his book on the ideal society *Republic* that the leader must tell “the noble lie” (*gennaion pseudos* in the Greek; sometimes loosely translated as “noble and generous fiction”) to the populace so that citizens will be content with their roles in life. Plato's idea that sometimes the government must lie to the populace for its own well-being has since become a relatively standard view in political theory, even in democracies where transparency and truthfulness in government are prized. It is obvious that the government cannot always tell the citizenry “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” when at war (because strategy would be compromised—“Loose lips sink ships”) or during terrorist threats (because then it could be very difficult to observe and catch terrorists). We can easily think of many similar examples.

Plato's “noble lie” is justified on the philosophical principle known as paternalism, from the Latin word *pater*, “father.” The familiar idea is that just as in the case of seat belt laws, sometimes the government, ruler, or parent may know what is better for us than we ourselves know. Sometimes if we knew the truth, this line goes, we would be made miserable by it, frightened by it, discouraged by it, or we would act in ways destructive to ourselves or others or both.

In the example given by Plato, citizens of his imaginary ideal state will be told that they were originally made of different metals—bronze, silver, gold—which suit them for different roles within the society. Tradesmen will be happy as tradesmen because they will believe the lie that they were

naturally made for that role; similarly, warriors will believe that they were made to be warriors. caste system that benefits the entire society can be harmoniously established on the basis of a simple lie that puts the minds of the citizenry at ease.

Plato's ideal state sounds a bit too much like Aldous Huxley's dystopian brave new world for our contemporary, democratic, class-conscious ears. But paternalistic defenses of lying are nonetheless vigorous and familiar. One of the most common and plausible justifications of a paternalist defense for lying comes from the lies we tell to children. We lie about Santa Claus in order to make Christmas a happier time for children and to teach them about the spirit of giving (also, perhaps, to control their behavior; how many times have I lied: "Santa's watching! Now get to bed!"); think about how many billions of dollars are spent every year in supporting this lie. Many people, both inside and outside the medical community, think that a lie to a dying child—such as "No, honey, we don't know for certain that you are going to die"—is generally justified (the medical profession is all over the map on this question, I should add; there is good evidence both for telling the truth to dying children and for lying to them). Many doctors argue that the right to lie to their patients is necessary to the best practice of the profession. And most of us who are parents have lied to our own children many, many times in order to preserve their peace of mind, either about family matters or about the way things are in the world. If a five-year-old asks a penetrating question about a matter she is not yet ready to understand, such as rape or murder or war or whether a plane is more likely to crash during heavy turbulence, most parents will not tell the unvarnished truth. We may not always out and out lie, but we will certainly say something that is not entirely honest and accurate.

Deceiving, prevaricating, exaggerating, storytelling, lying by omission: there are many different ways to lie, but all of them involve the desire to convince the person who is listening to the liar that she, the listener, believes something different from what the liar believes to be true. This is what Montaigne, who was generally opposed to lying, said: "The truth has only one face, but a lie has a hundred thousand." The liar can invent so many things that are different from the truth he knows, especially when speaking to a child, or someone with less knowledge than the liar.

Here's an interesting philosophical puzzle: For something to be a lie, must it be false? Normally we assume that a lie is not true. But consider this case: a man who always lies stands at a crossroads. You approach him and ask him for directions. He tells you to take the road to the left, lying to you about which road to take, as he always does. But it turns out that this man who always lies is also very bad at directions, and so, while lying, he sends you down the right road. Has he lied to you or not?

One solution to this puzzle is to argue that all that is required to lie is the intention to deceive. This is an appealing view because it frees the liar from the large epistemological burden she would otherwise bear to know the truth before lying. If I must *know* the truth before lying to you because to lie to you, I must tell you something that is false, then I may often be required to do an awful lot of work to discover what the truth actually is. Often we think we know the truth when we do not. Take the example of an ancient Greek astronomer who sincerely believed that the sun revolves around the earth. If we required that the astronomer know the truth about solar and planetary motion before having the capacity to lie about it, we see that he would find himself incapable of lying. But surely he has the capacity—within his particular context—both to report the truth as best he understands it and

consequently, to mislead.

But just to illustrate how vexing this puzzle actually is, if all that is required to deceive is the intention to deceive, then in some sense one can never fail to deceive, because we are completely in control of our intentions. To fail to deceive would, on this account, simply mean that the liar was not believed. However, if you approached the liar at the crossroads, and he intended to deceive you but because he is bad at directions, pointed you down the right road, and yet you did not believe him, you would find yourself going down the wrong road ... and perversely, the intention of the liar at the crossroads to mislead you would be successful. These philosophical tangles of what exactly constitutes a lie are not trivial for our purposes because part of the reason we deceive so commonly and with such a clean conscience about it is precisely the fact that deception, as Montaigne points out, is so complex and difficult to understand, even for the practiced liar. As we proceed, we shall also find—I gestured at this with my discussion of truth and subjectivity in the prologue—that contrary to Montaigne, truthful communication is also much more complex than it initially appears to be.

Here's another quick, personal example of how complicated it is to sort out what counts as a lie. I was recently driving to Iowa City, where my wife is a graduate student, when a friend called and asked if I could drive him to the store (his car was in the shop, and he was stuck at home). I said, "I wish I could, but I'm driving to Iowa City." Now, as it happens, I was on the outskirts of Kansas City, where I live, and only a dozen or so miles from my friend's house. I had spoken the literal truth—I was indeed driving to Iowa City—but when I asked my wife what she thought of the statement, she said, "Well, I think you did the right thing, but you should also admit to yourself that you lied to him." Her point was that the naked truth would have hurt his feelings ("I'm in a hurry, and I'm not going to make you a priority"), so yes, the deception was well intended, but my "literal truth" was nonetheless an example of deception. But the same sword cuts the opposite way: sometimes a literal falsehood may disguise a deeper truth.

Let's return to the phenomenon of paternalism as a justification for lying. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that it is permissible to lie when the good consequences of lying outweigh the bad consequences of lying, but we must always remember that one of the bad consequences of lying is that it tends to corrode our trust in communication and each other over time. As a general rule of thumb, therefore, lying does more harm than good, but in particular circumstances a lie might generate more good than harm. Mill appeals to what we call soft paternalism, which in the context of deception is the idea that if you had all the facts and were in a position to make the decision on the basis of the truth, you would decide to do what the lie encouraged you to do.

Let's say I'm guarding a bridge that will collapse if more than a dozen or so people try to cross at once, and because of an emergency a huge crowd of people are in a hurry to cross. I know that if I say, "Only a few people can cross this bridge at a time, or it will collapse," many people will rush to the bridge, trying to be the first to cross, and the bridge will in fact collapse. If, however, I lie and say, "Only one person can cross this bridge at a time, or it will definitely collapse," I know that only one person at a time will dare try to cross the bridge, and everyone will be able to cross safely.

Now, because of the noise, the urgency, the smoke, the chaos, I am unable to explain to everyone the whole situation, so I tell the lie. This is justified, Mill argues, because *if you were in a position*

*understand the truth, you would act according to the lie.* You would say, “Yes, I see the wisdom of one person’s crossing the bridge at a time,” and wait your turn in line. It is only the circumstances that require the lie—circumstances that constrain what you and others can be told. This is different from Plato’s “noble lie,” because, according to Plato, we should be told the lie specifically because we cannot handle the truth—and if we knew the truth, we might act very differently than Plato’s ruler wants us to act.

The difference in Plato’s and Mill’s approaches in part reflects a suspicion that emerged in the intervening two thousand years that we don’t know ourselves as well as we suppose we do. Plato thinks citizens have to be told a bald-faced lie, because if they knew the truth, they would want something that did not benefit the populace as a whole (even if it might help them personally). For Mill, by contrast, we must at times be lied to because we often simply aren’t in a position to judge what is in our own particular best interest. Plato imagines that the citizens of his fictional Republic are more rational and self-aware than Mill recognizes actual people to be. This is not to say that Plato thinks people are so rational that they need not be lied to at all; the perfectly rational citizen, in Plato’s view, would not need to be deceived because he or she would understand that society requires different people to occupy different roles within society. Plato insists that the people must be lied to for their own good. But the qualification Mill puts on his paternalism is interesting, for our purposes, because it incorporates the modern suspicion, already widespread in the nineteenth century, that we are often irrational, and so we may need to hold and be told false beliefs in order to promote our own flourishing.

Another philosopher who argues that it is sometimes permissible to lie is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in a Nazi concentration camp for, among other things, refusing to lie about his beliefs. Bonhoeffer argued for a concept he called “the living truth.” According to Bonhoeffer, we often mean something different from the literal truth of what we say, and we are often understood to mean something different from the literal truth of what we say.

So, for example, if I ask my wife, “Do you think I’m getting fat?” and she says, “No, honey, you haven’t gained a pound,” we both know that literally she’s telling a lie: it’s January, and I always gain about five or ten pounds over the holidays. But “the living truth” of what she’s telling me is that she thinks I look fine, and I don’t need to worry about my weight. This is also, she knows, the real reason I’m asking the question: I am in fact asking her to lie to me, though I wouldn’t want her to lie even more and say, “You look too thin! You need to put on a few pounds! Let’s order pizza tonight!”

Many of the stories we tell each other, or the stories in the Bible, Bonhoeffer argues, are not literally true; they are often in fact literally false. Nevertheless, they may communicate a “living truth” that could not be communicated in a better way.

To return to the story of Santa Claus: explaining that giving is a good, virtuous, kind thing is going to make only so much headway with a four-year-old. But telling a story about a good-natured, fun-loving fellow who picks one day a year to give gifts to everyone, after spending the whole year making the toys—that falsehood teaches the four-year-old a living truth about generosity that the child otherwise might not understand. Bonhoeffer’s notion of the living truth introduces the idea that sometimes the successful communication of a particular way of understanding the world or interpreting a situation—

of communicating, to refer to our earlier discussion, a subjective truth or meaning—may require that we use fictional or false discourse.

The connection between the difficulty of communicating subjective truth and Bonhoeffer's notion of the living truth is not coincidental: Kierkegaard, who introduced the notion of subjective truth in our discussion, was Bonhoeffer's single most important philosophical influence. Bonhoeffer's idea of the living truth derives from Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication, and though we don't want to be distracted by the intricate philosophical nuances of Kierkegaard's view, the basic idea is that an underlying truth can sometimes be conveyed only by a literal falsehood. This is why, both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer thought, so many of our most important truths are communicated through myths, fables, stories, and other forms of discourse that are strictly speaking false.

Bonhoeffer expands the idea of "the living truth" into realms of discourse and meaning where the truth is at best unknown. For example, when we make our marital vows—to love each other "until death do us part"—we are not really in a position to make any such promise. Half of all marriages end in divorce; many other marriages that last until death are unhappy ones. And yet the vow contains a "living truth" about the nature of love, the intensity of our particular love for each other, and our intention to try our best to maintain that love. When I say, "I will love you until I die," I may well have a nagging question in my mind about whether or not that is likely or even possible. Some cynics might reasonably protest: "Come on! You're in no position to make a promise like that!" But the point, Bonhoeffer would insist, is that I am communicating a living truth about my intentions and about what I hope will be the case, as well as about how I am feeling at that particular time. The literal truth of my words may be suspect, but the living truth of what I am saying, Bonhoeffer argues, is secure.

Of course we can readily see that a notion like "the living truth" can also get us into all sorts of trouble. It's all too easy to tell a lie and then protest, "But what I was really trying to say was that I loved you!" If a nine-year-old is suddenly embarrassed by a friend in the schoolyard when she protests that Santa Claus is real and all her friends mock her for continuing to believe that childhood lie, she won't be easily consoled by her parents' long-winded explanation of Bonhoeffer's idea of the living truth or Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication. The living truth may be used to manipulate the beliefs of others—in fact that's what it is designed to do—and we generally worry, and for good reasons, that the manipulation of the beliefs of others is at least morally suspect, if not simply morally blameworthy. Paternalism of this kind—if we assume that we know what's best for someone else to believe—is sometimes presumptuous and always risky (when and why does paternalism end?).

Now we'll turn to some arguments that it is always (or almost always) wrong to lie.

## ONE SHOULD NEVER LIE

There's a ferocious knocking on your door. It's past midnight. You stumble downstairs, open the door a crack, and a bloody man screams: "She's after me! Please save me! She's going to kill me!" He's large and strong but young, and you can see he's in terrible trouble. You open the door and tell him to hide in the closet upstairs. A few minutes later, while you try to explain the situation to your spouse,



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